LIFE

# 100 Years of DISNEY

## Ideas That Changed the World

## The Thrill of the Parks

## The Magic of the Movies

A HISTORY OF HAPPINESS

LIFE

# 100 Years of DISNEY

Walt and Mickey, 1950.

Celebratory fireworks over the Magic Kingdom in Florida, 2020.

# CONTENTS


**4**
*Introduction*
Magic Makers

**8**
A Century of Joy

**20**
*Chapter 1*
The Man Behind the Mouse

**30**
*Chapter 2*
Lifting Off

**47** Music and Lyricists

**52**
*Chapter 3*
A Growing Kingdom

**66** The Artists

**70**
*Chapter 4*
A New Generation

**84**
*Chapter 5*
All the World's a Stage

100 YEARS

# MAGIC MAKERS

The small company that Walt and Roy Disney founded in 1923 has thrilled audiences for 100 years.

BY *Daniel S. Levy*

**IN EARLY 1934, WALT** Disney called over a number of his staff and gave them money so they could buy dinner across the street from Hyperion Studios in Los Angeles. After they ate, he ushered them onto the sound stage. The group sat in a circle, and as animator Ken Anderson recalled, Walt "proceeded to intrigue us . . . acting and telling [the story of *Snow White*], even anticipating the songs and the kind of music, and he so thrilled us with the complete recitation of all the characters that he had created that we were just carried away . . . we had no concept that we were ever going to do anything else or ever want to do anything else. We wanted to do what he had just told us!"

Walt had the seemingly magical ability to inspire his workers, and as a protean leader, he possessed the skill to make his vision come true. When *Snow White*, the first full-length animated movie, opened in December 1937, its story and visuals mesmerized and moved audiences, and it became an instant box office hit. Like his fellow Missourian Mark Twain, Walt was a consummate spinner of tales. He mythologized memories of his childhood in the rural town of Marceline, plumbed the human experience, and dealt with such issues as discovery, fear, longing, death, and love. In the process, he conjured up an Edenic cinematic idyll that has touched the hearts of generations of moviegoers and transformed him into one of the great filmmakers of the 20th century.

Yet success for his then 14-year-old Walt Disney Productions had not always been assured. When 21-year-old Walt and his 30-year-old brother, Roy, founded what they originally called the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio on October 16, 1923, they had to cobble together a few hundred dollars from family and friends and labor out of a $10-a-month rental space in Los Angeles. Their first widely successful series premiered on September 5, 1927, and followed the activities of Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. They created 27 Oswald shorts for Universal before the studio asserted its rights to the creation and many of Disney's animators were hired away.

Walt's lack of foresight in owning his own creation could have crippled his company. Instead, it forced him and his versatile animator Ub Iwerks to create Mickey Mouse. The round-eared rodent debuted on November 18, 1928,

**PLATINUM STATUES OF MICKEY and Minnie Mouse were installed at Disneyland in Anaheim, California, in 2023 to commemorate 100 years of the Walt Disney Company.**

in *Steamboat Willie*, the first synchronized sound animation. Mickey's arrival proved revelatory. When the critter appears on the screen whistling and afterward enlists assorted barnyard animals to play "Turkey in the Straw," audiences who up until then only knew silent films found themselves giddy with amazement.

In no time, Mickey developed into a movie star on par with Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks. And as the Disney studio prospered, it attracted talented artists who could translate Walt's vision onto paper, paint them onto animation cels, and finally capture them on film. Not only did they create Mickey and the popular Silly Symphony shorts, but from 1937 to 1942 they released *Snow White* as well as the equally groundbreaking *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia*, *Dumbo,* and *Bambi*—movies that revolutionized the look, substance, and making of animations.

It wasn't long before Walt's company ventured into television and then created Disneyland, a vacation destination that altered America's leisure time. When Walt died in 1966 at age 65, Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* commented how he was "the most persistent and successful fantasist of our age." Roy died five years later. Then for more than a decade, the Walt Disney Company languished in a creative and financial slump. But starting in the mid-1980s, it was run by business executives like Michael Eisner, with the CEO telling the *Times* in 1994, "You have to reinvent yourself almost every seven years or so, as businesses mature and situations change."

The new corporate overlords did just that. While Disney still made the animation and live-action films their audience craved and ran the amusement parks the brothers had founded, they shifted the focus of the House that Walt Built. With the creation of Touchstone Films in 1984 and the acquisition of other film companies like Miramax, in 1993, Disney expanded beyond simple G-rated fare, coming out with such movies as *Signs* and *Pulp Fiction*, cinema that no doubt would make Walt blanch. This

**COLLABORATORS WALT Disney (opposite, left) and Ub Iwerks (opposite, right) met while working at a Kansas City art studio in 1919. Iwerks was instrumental in helping Walt develop and animate his signature character, Mickey Mouse. More than a century later, their legacy lives on in the hearts of children across the globe, such as 6-year-old Emily San Miguel (above), who visited Disneyland in 2023 dressed as Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*.**

strategic change ushered in an artistic renaissance for the firm. The post–Walt-and-Roy Disney can be viewed as Mickey on steroids, a bulked-up business that surprisingly retains the agility of the young and savvy mouse.

They worked with and then bought Pixar Animation, creating films like *The Incredibles*. They enlarged their TV holdings with the purchase of ABC and ESPN and produced shows such as *The Mandalorian*. They trod the boards with Tony-winning Broadway shows including *Newsies the Musical*. They opened amusement parks around the world, set sail as a cruise company, and built architecturally award-winning buildings, even venturing into urban community design. As of 2023, the firm is worth some $162 billion, and in our oddly fractured nation, Disney offers a shared familial identity to its audience. "If there's any unifying cultural force in America that transcends most of our differences it would be Disney," Garry Apgar, author of *A Mickey Mouse Reader,* suggests to LIFE.

Back in 1954, Walt mused, "I only hope that we never lose sight of one thing—that it was all started by a mouse." To this day, that character more than anyone or anything else represents Disney. Well into his nineties, Mickey is as chipper as ever, having over the years starred and cameoed in hundreds of films, television shows, and video games. And just like Mickey, the creations of the now 100-year-old Walt Disney company still make us all feel young. As Bill Cotter, author of *The Wonderful World of Disney Television* tells LIFE, Walt's namesake accomplishes this because it "brings out the inner child in all of us."

100 YEARS

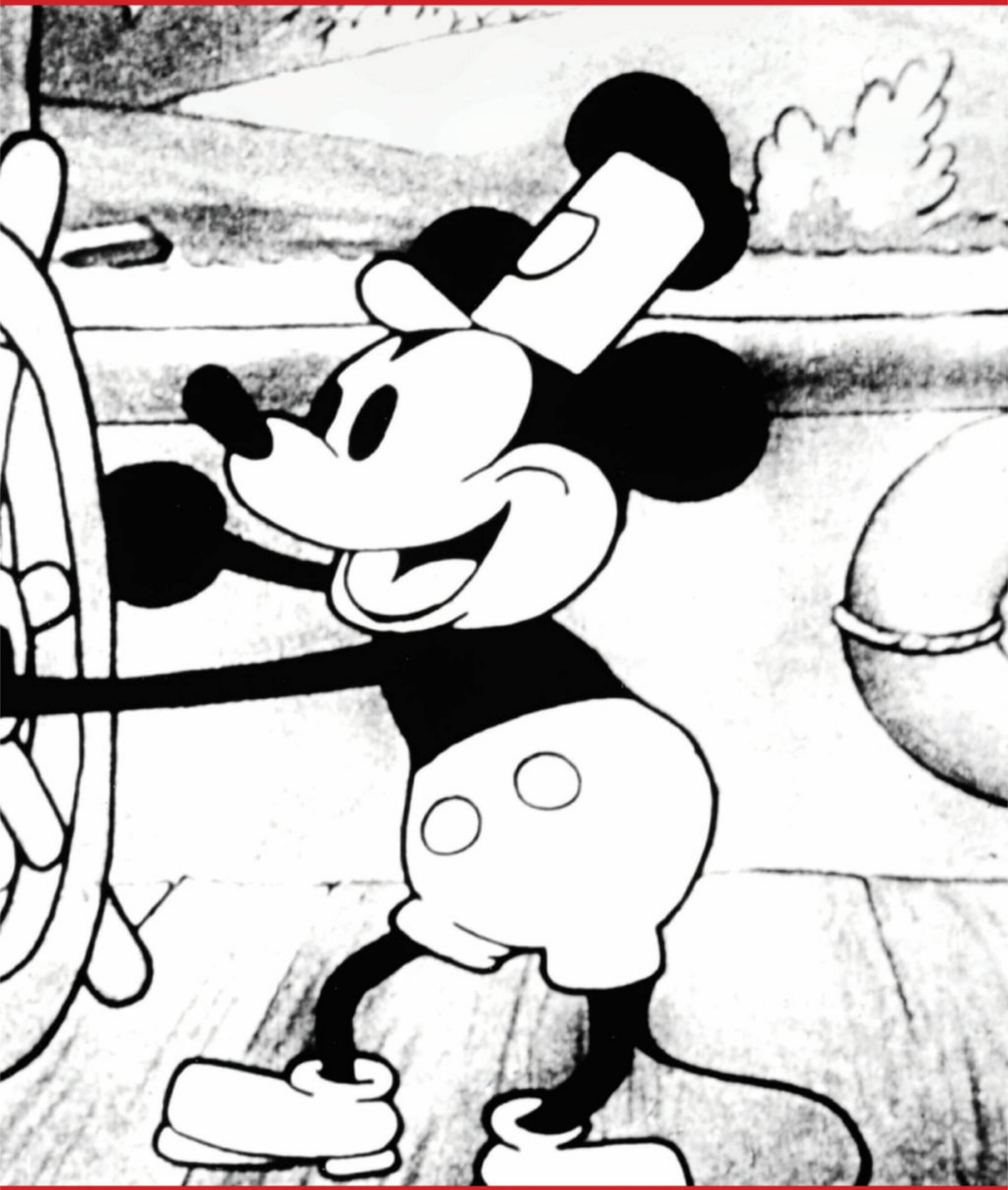
# A CENTURY OF JOY

It's not just Mickey.
A look at some of Disney's
greatest creations.

1920s

## *Steamboat Willie*

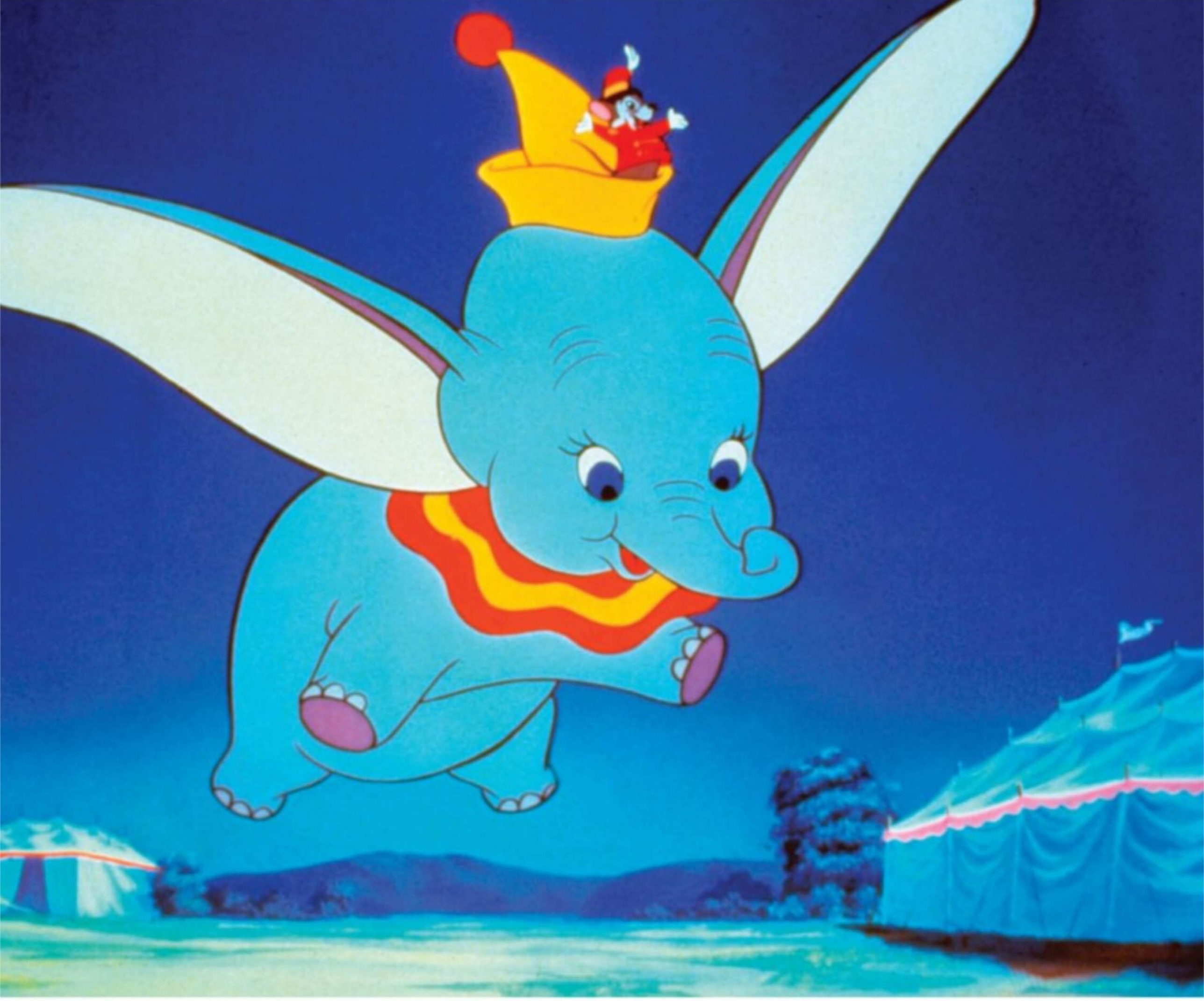
Mickey Mouse burst onto the screen in 1928 in the first successful synchronized sound animation, an eight-minute tour de force, which opens with Mickey whistling the popular tune "Steamboat Bill." He and Minnie then orchestrate "Turkey in the Straw" with the assorted animal passengers, all the while fending off the brutish, tobacco-spitting Captain Pete. Although Mickey doesn't speak—that would come the following year with *The Karnival Kid*—a parrot does. The film debuted in New York on the same bill as *Gang War*, starring Jack Pickford, whom film buffs will recall as the kid brother of "America's Sweetheart" Mary Pickford. Mickey's star has only grown brighter over the subsequent decades.



1930s

## *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

As a teenager, Walt Disney attended a screening of Marguerite Clark's 1916 *Snow White*. He was so taken by the story that two decades later he filmed his own version. But this proved no remake. The studio's first feature-length animation artfully combined story development, drawing, and character personality, creating an original film imbued with technical effects, depth, and richness beyond anything audiences had seen until then. All that, and a whistleable and hummable score by Frank Churchill. Released in 1937, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* tenaciously competed with the major studios' live-action films. While it cost a then exorbitant $1.5 million ($32 million in 2023) to produce, it has been rereleased eight times and earned more than $1 billion in 2023 dollars, making it the highest-grossing animation ever.



1940s

## *Pinocchio & Dumbo*

Childhood can be a painful time, and Disney has regularly explored the apprehensions and joys of youth. When the fatherly woodcarver Geppetto wishes for a son, the Blue Fairy only partially grants his wish, breathing life into a marionette named Pinocchio. Trapped in a puppet's body, the wooden child suffers the vicissitudes of growing up. Thankfully, the fairy has granted him Jiminy Cricket, who possesses the conscience needed to guide him and helps bring about his corporeal transformation. Dumbo, meanwhile, is born with macrotia (aka oversized ears). Those around him see it as an unfortunate physical deformity, and they shun and mock the little elephant. Dumbo, though, is blessed with congenital gumption. He proves that his perceived curse is really a gift and uses those ears to fly, soaring into stardom.

1950s

# Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier

The studio's first hit TV series started as a promotional program to advertise the upcoming opening of Disneyland (below). Its 1954 debut turned Fess Parker as the fabled Crockett into a star and ushered in a Crockett bonanza. LIFE magazine reported how "The Crockett craze, unexpected even by the watchful Walt Disney, has produced a corresponding Crockett mania in commercial circles." Fans snapped up Crockett wallets, shoes, fringed leather jackets, and coonskin hats, with an all-white faux fur version known as Polly Crockett hats marketed to girls. The hats sold at a rate of 5,000 per day—no doubt impacting the national raccoon population—and, along with other Crockett merchandise, totaled sales of some $100 million ($1.1 billion in 2023). In 2004, Parker donated his hat to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

1960s

# *Mary Poppins*

Merging live action and film was nothing new for Disney. The firm's Alice Comedies in the 1920s combined a human protagonist with cartoon characters. But they perfected the look in 1964's *Mary Poppins*. Much of the film's magic was made possible by an innovative sodium traveling matte process. In this predecessor to the green screen, actors are positioned in front of a white screen lit by a sodium vapor light. When they are filmed, a beam-splitting prism differently exposes separate color and black-and-white rolls of film. Since the films are shot simultaneously, the positions of the images are perfectly synched, which allows for the merging of the two and the subsequent addition of animated sequences. The result is truly supercalifragilisticexpialidocious, making this Disney's only movie during Walt's life to be nominated for a Best Picture Oscar.

1970s

# The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh

The Disney company has a long tradition of adapting popular children's stories, such as Alice in Wonderland and Peter Pan. The company licensed the rights to A.A. Milne's stories about the honey-loving Winnie the Pooh in 1961 and produced three short films, combining them in 1977. The works kept the beloved black outlines and light color washes of Milne's illustrator E.H. Shepard and include songs by Disney tunemasters Richard and Robert Sherman. In 2001, Disney bought the rights outright to the Milne characters. The copyright for most of the characters expired in January 2022, and in no time, the non-Disney *Winnie the Pooh: Blood and Honey* opened in theaters. In it, the gentle occupants of the Hundred Acre Wood have morphed into cannibalistic monsters. The *New York Times* dismissed the film as one that "limps from one slasher cliché to the next."

1980s

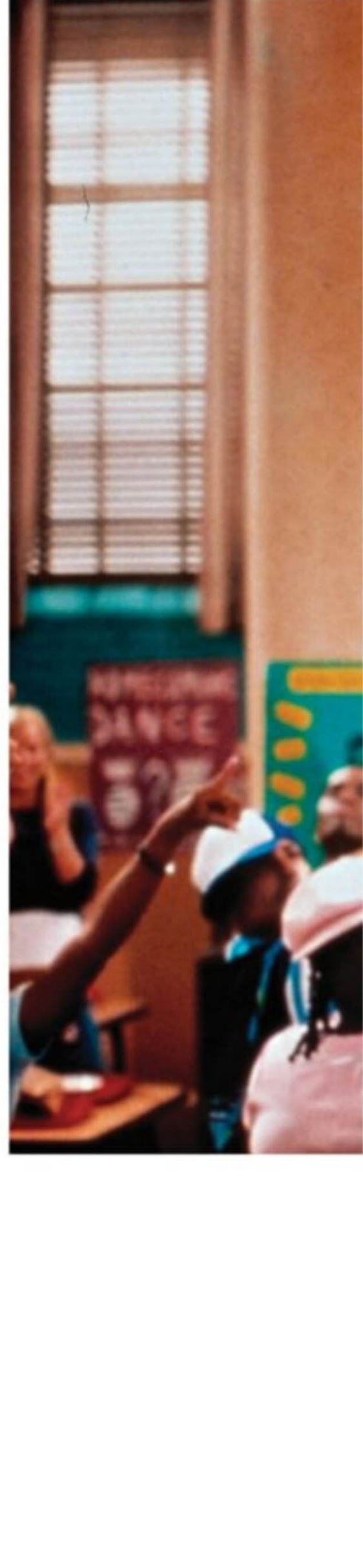
# *Splash & The Little Mermaid*

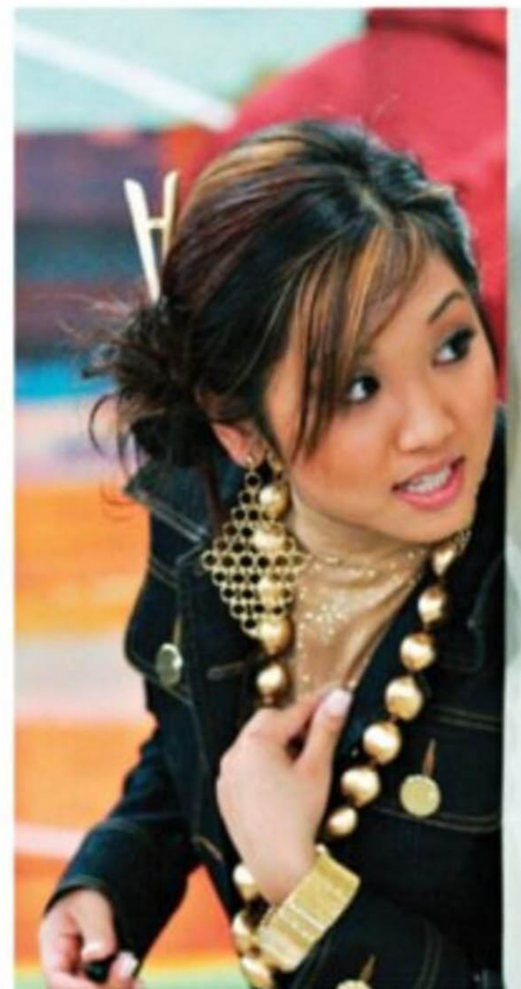
When the company first dove into non–G-rated films, it made quite a splash (sorry) and turned Daryl Hannah and Tom Hanks into stars. The 1984 film was loosely based on Hans Christian Andersen's 1837 story *The Little Mermaid*, a tale that Hannah loved as a child; she told *Cinefantastique* magazine, "I felt that the character was already a part of me." In the movie, a young mermaid named Madison saves 8-year-old Allen after he tumbles from a boat. Thankfully, he is congenitally clumsy, and 20 years later a grown-up Madison (Hannah, above) again comes to the aid of Allen (Hanks) when he takes another dunk. Things then take a decidedly romantic turn in this boy-meets-a-girl-he-doesn't-realize-is-a-fish film. When Disney came out with its 1989 animation (below), it tacked closer to the original Anderson tale, with Princess Ariel falling for the dashing Prince Eric.

1990s

## *The Lion King*

Stage productions seemed a natural fit for Disney when, in 1994, it adapted its Academy Award–winning 1991 *Beauty and the Beast*. This was part of the firm's larger game plan of planting its theatrical flag on Broadway and one day turning the glorious New Amsterdam Theatre into its home base. But their most brilliant move happened when they tapped MacArthur Genius Fellowship recipient and off-Broadway darling Julie Taymor to direct 1997's *The Lion King* (based on the 1994 movie, top). Taymor merged actors with life-size puppets, an idea that stemmed from her time studying puppetry and theater in Indonesia. The training enabled her vision to come to life (above). *Variety* called the production "a theatrical achievement unrivaled in its beauty, brains, and ingenuity," and it went on to win six Tonys.





# Disney Channel Series

The Disney Channel launched in 1983 and has served as a theatrical training school for child actors. This was especially true when it hit its stride in the new millennium. In 2001, audiences embraced Hilary Duff as Lizzie McGuire (below, right), a middle schooler dealing with the angst of growing up. Two years later we met teenager Raven Baxter in *That's So Raven* (above), with Raven-Symoné playing a clairvoyant high schooler; the actor also appeared in *Kim Possible* as well as *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*, which also starred Brenda Song (below, left). Both *Kim Possible* and *Suite Life* similarly featured Ashley Tisdale, who also starred in *Phineas and Ferb* and would graduate to the *High School Musical* franchise. And as a sign that there is life after child stardom, Duff starred on Disney's Hulu channel in *How I Met Your Father*, Tisdale starred on Netflix's *Skylanders Academy*, Song voiced Anna on Disney's *Amphibia,* and Raven-Symoné led Disney's *Raven's Home*, in which the grown Raven is a single mother—a psychic who clearly didn't quite envision that future coming.

2010s

# *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*

Disney slipped into hyperdrive when it bought George Lucas's Lucasfilm in 2012. It acquired his Industrial Light & Magic and Skywalker Sound divisions, but the real prize was ownership of the *Star Wars* franchise. It wasn't long before Disney completed the saga of Luke and Leia's family. Daisy Ridley as the orphan Rey takes up Luke's blue-bladed lightsaber to defend the galaxy from those like Leia and Han Solo's bad-to-the-bone son, Ben, a.k.a. Kylo Ren, who has quaffed the Dark Side's Kool-Aid. The downfall of the First Order and redemption follow. And the studio's purchase has meant numerous offshoots for Lucas's tales, including such films as *Solo* and *Rogue One,* and TV shows like *The Mandalorian* and *Obi-Wan Kenobi* and the new animated *Young Jedi Adventures*.

2020s

## *Mulan* & *Cruella*

Starting with 1994's *Rudyard Kipling's The Jungle Book*, a remake of 1967's *The Jungle Book*, live-action versions of popular animations have become a staple for Disney. It has also allowed the company to dig deep into its treasure trove of tales. In 2020, the studio released *Mulan* (above), its first film with an all-Asian cast. This sword-and-martial-arts extravaganza offers a long-overdue feminist retelling of the story and excises much of the romantic subplot from the 1998 animation. The following year we learned of the Dickensian roots of Cruella de Vil, that fur-obsessed villain in 1961's *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*. In *Cruella* (below), it seems that the antihero has a Freudian grudge against Dalmatians who killed her mum, and her subsequent Artful Dodgeresque upbringing and eye for fashion help explain her odd obsession with spotted coats.

100 YEARS

*Chapter 1*

# THE MAN BEHIND THE MOUSE

Walt Disney was fascinated by drawing and first ventured into animation while still a teenager.

**Walt Disney, circa 1920, started his career designing letterhead and ads for a commercial studio in Kansas City.**

**WALT'S FATHER, ELIAS (ABOVE, right), met his wife, Flora (above, left), while substitute teaching in Kansas, and the two later tied the knot in Kismet, Florida, on January 1, 1888. The couple moved multiple times over the years, eventually settling in Marceline, Missouri, with their young family, including Walt (opposite).**

**WALT DISNEY DIDN'T** mind the office mice scampering around the McConahay Building. He often worked late on the second floor at his Laugh-O-gram animation studio in Kansas City, and he appreciated the company. When not drawing, he would watch as the tiny creatures fought over crumbs in the wastebasket. One evening he spotted a mouse eating some cheese. He picked up the little scamp and put it in a small wire cage on his desk. Walt became especially fond of him, found him to be a well-behaved companion, and recalled years later: "He was a timid little guy. By tapping him on the nose with my pencil, I trained him to run inside a black circle I drew on my drawing board." A real mouse kept Walter Elias Disney company after he started his career in 1921, and the one he created in 1928 and named Mickey would not only define the rest of his life, but serve as the basis for one of the world's most successful entertainment firms.

A love of animals started early for Walt, as a child growing up in Marceline, Missouri, 125 miles northeast of Kansas City. In 1906, when Walt was 4 years old, Elias and Flora Disney moved their family from Chicago to this quiet Midwestern town of about 3,000 with a gazeboed square, dry goods store, creamery, and farm-machinery shop. Elias's brother Robert had some land there, and Elias and his three older sons, Herbert, Raymond, and Roy, began tilling their own 45-acre spread. Flora, meanwhile, watched over Walt and 2-year-old Ruth while also cooking, cleaning, making butter, and tending the vegetable garden.

The Disneys lived in a one-story farmhouse. Around their home loomed maples, lilacs, dogwoods, willows, fruit trees, and berry bushes, the land inhabited by raccoons, rabbits, and foxes. In the barn lived cows, hogs, horses, and chickens. Walt had a pet Maltese dog and a small pig called Skinny. "Everything connected with Marceline was a thrill to us," Walt later said in a letter to the town paper in 1938. As Garry Apgar, author of *A Mickey Mouse Reader* tells LIFE, "This was a tranquil period, and it must have been a magical place."

For the youngster, Marceline offered a Tom Sawyer-ish life with few chores. "[I]t was just heaven for city kids," Roy said. The children fished, rode horses and pigs, swam in the creek, and sledded in the winter. In town, Walt saw his first film, a movie about the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. He also attended the Buffalo Bill Wild West show and got to meet the impresario.

One day a traveling troupe rolled through Marceline and staged *Peter Pan* at the Cater Opera House on Kansas Avenue. Maude Adams, famous for her role as the Lost Boy, starred, and eager to attend, Walt emptied his piggy bank and bought tickets for himself and Roy. "For two hours, we lived in Neverland with Peter and his friends.

THE SMALL TOWN OF Marceline (top) served as an idyllic backdrop for the Disney children's upbringing. When Walt was 8 or 9 years old, Marceline welcomed a touring production of *Peter Pan*, starring Maude Adams (above), which proved inspirational for the youngster (opposite, at right), who not only went on to play Peter Pan in a school production but also created the beloved animated film decades later, in 1953.

I took many memories away from the theater with me, but the most thrilling of all was the vision of Peter flying through the air," he explained in *Brief* magazine in 1953. Soon after, Walt's school staged the play by J.M. Barrie and Walt got to star as Peter, recalling, "I was more realistic than Maude Adams in at least one particular: I actually flew through the air! Roy was using a block and tackle to hoist me. It gave way, and I flew right into the faces of the surprised audience."

Fortunately, Walt had patient parents. Flora was quite a loving mother. While Elias tended to be a dour and taciturn father, he was supportive, unwinding only when he played his fiddle. Walt, on the other hand, loved pranks and drawing animals. His Aunt Maggie sensed his talent and gifted him pencils and paper. He was similarly helped by their neighbor, the retired Doc Sherwood. "He used to encourage me in my drawing," Walt told the *Marceline News*. As Michael Barrier, author of *The Animated Man: A Life of Walt Disney* tells LIFE, "It was a very low-stress environment. It was very quiet and peaceful and loving." Not all of Walt's artwork was appreciated, though, especially when he and Ruth used tar to paint the side of the house, a coating they could not wash off.

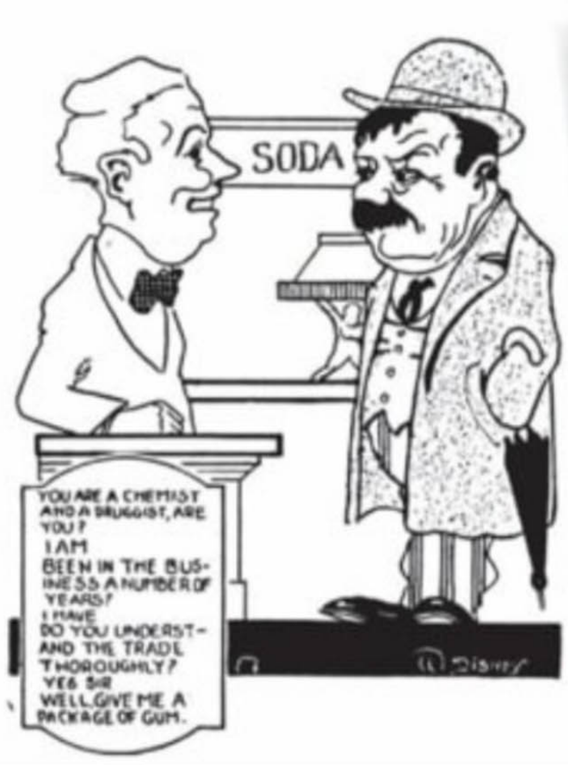
Marceline sat on the Santa Fe rail line, and one of the treats for the young man was when the train rolled through town. Walt found locomotives enchanting and was especially thrilled that his uncle Mike Martin worked as an engineer: "After all, if you can't be an engineer yourself, the next best thing is to have a relative who is one."

On their land, Elias tried planting everything from wheat and corn to barley and sorghum. He was not a successful farmer, and his poor money management caused Herbert and Raymond to decide they'd had enough and hightail it back to Chicago. With two fewer hands, things did not improve. The well ran dry, and Elias became quite ill. Roy, age 16, took over running the farm, but he had a hard go at it, and Elias, persuaded by Flora, finally sold their spread.

In 1910, the Disneys moved to Kansas City, a community of 248,000 that had developed into a major industrial center. Elias bought a paper route and enlisted his two sons to help. It was grueling work. Roy and a 9-year-old Walt rose at 3:30 in the morning to make their deliveries, then headed off

1. H eis a devil in his own home town. 2. Corporal Higgins father wrote: "Please don't forget to bring home a good souvenir of your trip to France." 3. A few years from now "Combien for the bunch. 4. The Thinker.

I UNDERSTAND THAT THIS TOWN HAD A NUMBER OF HEROES IN THIS WAR WHAT INDIVIDUAL HOLDS MOST OF THE MEDALS?
WAL, SIR I GUESS IT'S THE PAWN BROKER


SODA
YOU ARE A CHEMIST AND A DRUGGIST, ARE YOU?
I AM
BEEN IN THE BUSINESS A NUMBER OF YEARS?
I HAVE
DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE TRADE THOROUGHLY?
YES SIR
WELL GIVE ME A PACKAGE OF GUM.

Somewhere in France April 13th 1919
Dear School Chums:
Well how is every thing around McKinley High School? Fine.
I just remembered that I owed a letter to my old school paper, so here it is.
Well, I am feeling to-day here and very home I am fine also hard. I am stationed in Neufchateau not far from Chaumont.
the headquarters
Oh! I WANT TO GO HOME TO MY MAMA
Will so long or auf wiedersehen for this time hoping to see all of you soon.
Remain as ever your old artist.
APO 731 Neufchateau France
I WANNA GO HOME; I DO—

to school, only to make more stops after classes. The labor proved especially hard in the winter with the deep snow.

From his father's continuing financial struggles, Walt came to understand perseverance. "He learned about adversity," says Apgar, "but he was born an optimist." He could easily charm people, and as Apgar notes, "There was something about him that was captivating." Others noticed this trait, too. Roy had started dating Edna Francis, and she recalled meeting his kid brother and couldn't help but observe how Roy watched out for him. "Roy and I were just going together . . . We stopped at a drugstore to get a soda, and Walt came to see Roy because he wanted a quarter or a half-dollar for paper to draw on. Even then, Roy provided the money for Walt's artistic ambitions."

Walt continued to do his artwork and draw cartoons, and when picking up papers at the *Kansas City Star*, he received instruction from the paper's art director. He even took classes at the Kansas City Art Institute. Unfortunately, Elias's paper route, like

**WALT'S ILLUSTRATING talents were evident early on. His work, including dispatches from France while serving just after World War I, appeared in Chicago's McKinley High School yearbook in 1919 (above) and 1920 (above, left). Walt also left his mark on the side of the ambulance he drove.**

many of his business ventures, showed little profit. Elias sold it and moved the family back to Chicago, where he bought the O-Zell jelly and fruit company. When Walt entered McKinley High School, he became the cartoonist at the school paper, and he took classes at the Art Institute of Chicago.

After the United States entered World War I in April 1917, Roy enlisted in the Navy. Walt also wanted to ship overseas, but at 16 was too young to sign up. Flora forged Elias's signature so Walt could get a passport, and he joined the Red Cross Ambulance Corp. But by the time he crossed the Atlantic, the war had ended. There was still work to do in the war-ravaged continent, though. He drove Red Cross ambulances and supply trucks in France, did auto repair work, and ferried Army officers. He continued his drawings and unsuccessfully sent work to American publications. He also started to smoke.

Back Stateside in late 1919, Walt returned to Kansas City. He hoped to become a political cartoonist but could find no work. Instead, he scored a $50-a-month job for the commercial art shop Pesmen-Rubin. There he turned out drawings for ads for supply companies, farm equipment, and a local theater. At Pesmen-Rubin he met Ubbe "Ub" Iwerks, the son of Dutch immigrants. The two 18-year-olds bonded and formed Iwerks-Disney Commercial Artists. Their firm lasted only a month, and the partners then found work at the Kansas City Slide Company, an advertising firm that made short films for movie houses.

At that point, animation was still in its infancy. James Stuart Blackton helped pioneer the medium in 1900 by experimenting with a stop-motion technique, halting the camera after each frame, making a small change to a drawing, then shooting another frame. By doing this over and over, his film, *The Enchanted Drawing*, elicited the feel of movement. Techniques quickly advanced, and in 1914 Winsor McCay made *Gertie the Dinosaur,* with its beautifully drawn, lifelike, and humorous star. There was growing demand for such films, and in 1919, Pat Sullivan and Otto Messmer's Felix the Cat—a feline with a famous brooding walk—became the first cartoon

character to draw audiences to the theater just to see him.

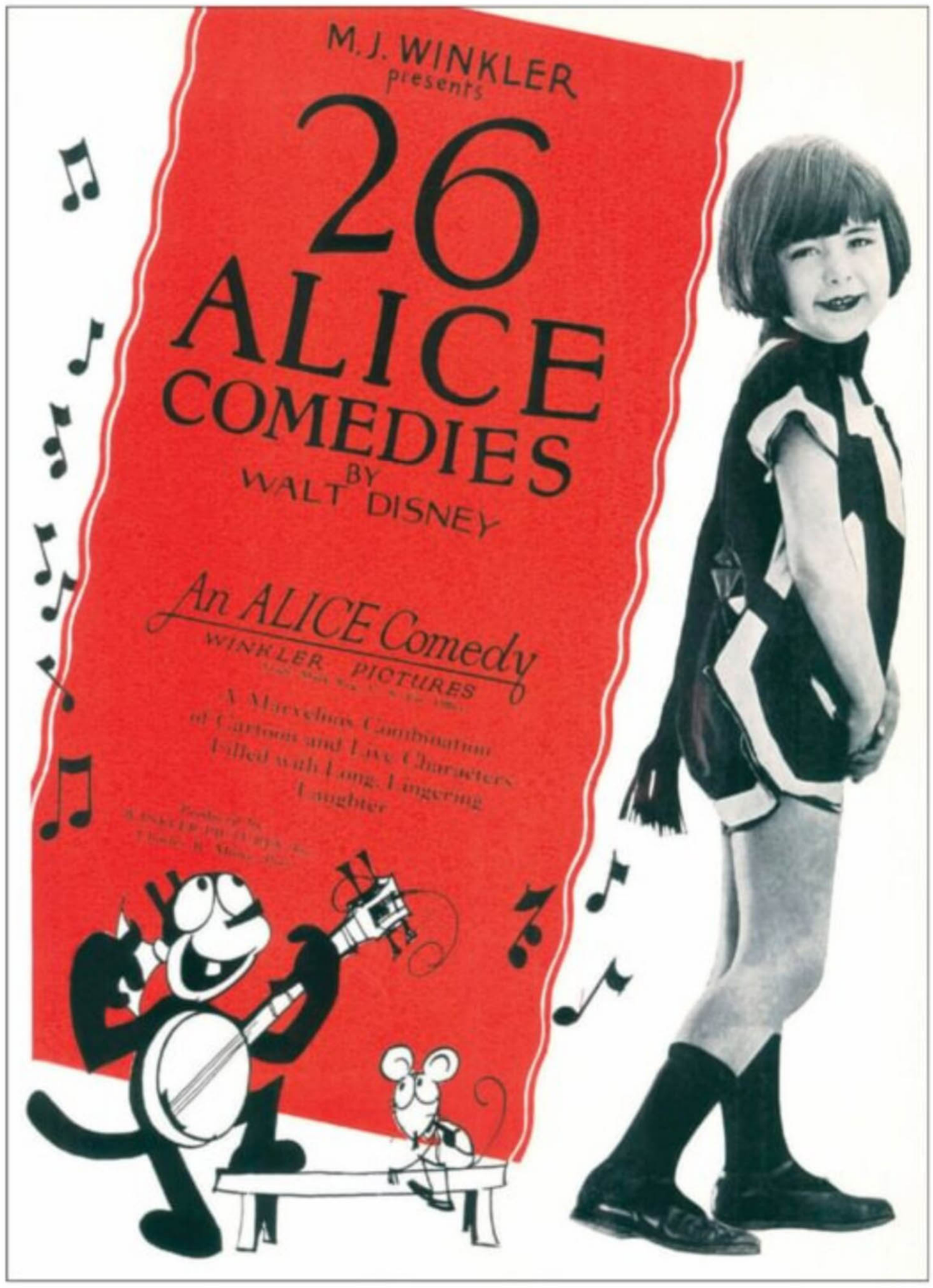
By the mid-1920s, the animation industry was flourishing. Max Fleischer, best remembered for his later Betty Boop films, combined human and cartoon characters with his *Out of the Inkwell* shorts. Its star, Koko the Clown, was made to move by using a rotoscope process, with Fleischer filming his brother Dave dancing around, and then tracing the individual frames and filming the drawings to create realistic, fluid movement.

Walt read up on animations in E.G. Lutz's *Animated Cartoons* and studied the animal and human movement images of the British photographer Eadweard Muybridge. He and Ub borrowed their boss's camera, set up shop in Herbert's garage, and produced live-action films for the slide company. Since he showed them at the town's Newman Theatre, Walt called the films Newman Laugh-O-grams. Then with $15,000 borrowed from backers, he incorporated Laugh-O-gram Films, and with Ub and other young animators started producing a series of cartoons and fairy tales.

While at the movies, Walt saw an ad for Warneker's Bread featuring a young girl with a sweet smile and blond ringlets. He hired the 4-year-old Virginia Davis, and he and his crew started to make Alice Comedies films based on the *Alice in Wonderland* story by Lewis Carroll, a tale Disney would revisit three decades later. Davis played Alice, and they filmed her against a white screen, positioning her in a certain spot, and then planned the animations around her location. In a process called bipacking, they loaded the developed film containing Davis's scenes and overlayed it with an undeveloped roll. They then shot the animation so the images merged. In Davis's first film, *Alice's Wonderland*, she visits a cartoon studio and that night dreams she has entered Cartoonland. There she rides on an elephant in a parade as giraffes, hippos, dogs, and spoonbills hoist placards proclaiming "Welcome Alice" and "Long Live Alice." She then does a jig and even battles a pride of hungry lions.

Unfortunately, Walt soon ran out of funds, and in 1923 Laugh-O-gram filed for bankruptcy. Walt decided to head out to Hollywood, where he hoped to make it as a director. Just before he left Kansas City, he released the mouse from the cage on his desk. "I carefully carried him to the backyard, making sure it was a nice neighborhood, and the tame little fellow scampered to freedom."

The 21-year-old gathered up his few belongings: "I packed all of my worldly goods—a pair of trousers, a checkered coat, a lot of drawing materials, and the last of the fairy-tale reels we had made—in a kind of frayed cardboard suitcase." He then boarded a train with just $40 to his name and recalled how he set off for the West Coast "with that wonderful audacity of youth."



**BY THE LATE 1910s, WALT (opposite) was toiling away at Pesmen-Rubin in Kansas City, but he would soon make his movie dreams a reality. In 1923, he and Iwerks produced their first Alice Comedy, a 10-minute short called *Alice's Wonderland*. Among Walt's many influences was Max Fleischer, an animator who created Koko the Clown (above) as well as Betty Boop.**

100 YEARS

*Chapter 2*

# LIFTING OFF

With the success of Mickey Mouse, Walt Disney pushed the boundaries of animation and turned it into a serious art form.

**Walt Disney and Mickey, accompanied by a flight attendant, boarded a plane bound for the Chicago World's Fair in 1933.**

CURTISS WRIGHT
CONDOR

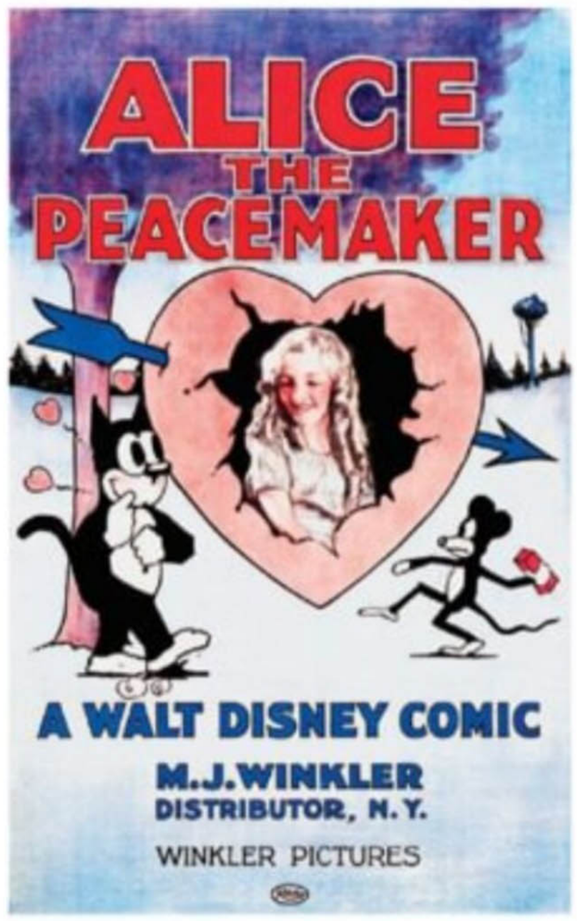
AMERICAN AIRWAYS

MAXIMUM CAPACITY
THIS COMPARTMENT
225 LB.

AFTER WORLD WAR I, Hollywood became the center of the American film industry with studios like Warner Brothers, United Artists, Columbia Pictures, and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer settling in town. But when Walt Disney arrived in Los Angeles, he couldn't find work. Eager to start making movies, Walt wrote to Margaret Winkler, a New York distributor, about his Alice Comedies. She liked the idea and ordered up 12 shorts, offering him $1,500 for the first six films and $1,800 for six more.

Walt set up shop in his uncle Robert's garage in the Los Feliz neighborhood of Los Angeles. Roy had already moved to the city; the brothers borrowed some money, and on October 16, 1923, they founded Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio. Soon they had their operation running out of the back of an office on Kingswell Avenue. Walt was the visionary; Roy watched over the costs. "Walt was not a businessman. He was better at spending money than saving it," Disney historian Garry Apgar tells LIFE. "He was blessed by having Roy as the older brother. He looked after him." As historian Michael Barrier tells LIFE, "Roy really was not a creative person. But I think he recognized the creativity in Walt and encouraged it."

To make the films, though, Walt needed more than a business partner. His Kansas City friend Ub Iwerks proved the ideal person for him, a fast worker with a keen technical facility who could create believable perspective and knew how to make animated drawings move. "This is the place for you," Walt wrote to him ahead of Iwerks's move out west, "a real country to work and play in." Winkler had insisted that Virginia Davis, who appeared in *Alice's Wonderland*, remain the star, so Walt guaranteed the girl's family a starting




**A BEHIND-THE-SCENES LOOK at Walt directing actress Virginia Davis for his Alice Comedies in 1923. He and Ub Iwerks would make dozens of the shorts. Two years after Alice's debut, Walt married Lillian (opposite), an inker at the Disney Studios.**

salary of $100 a month, and they came to Los Angeles. Davis made more than a dozen Alice films. She recalled Walt as a "very kind, very patient" director, saying in an interview about his shoestring budget, "They only had enough money to film it once. . . . We couldn't do it over again. That was it."

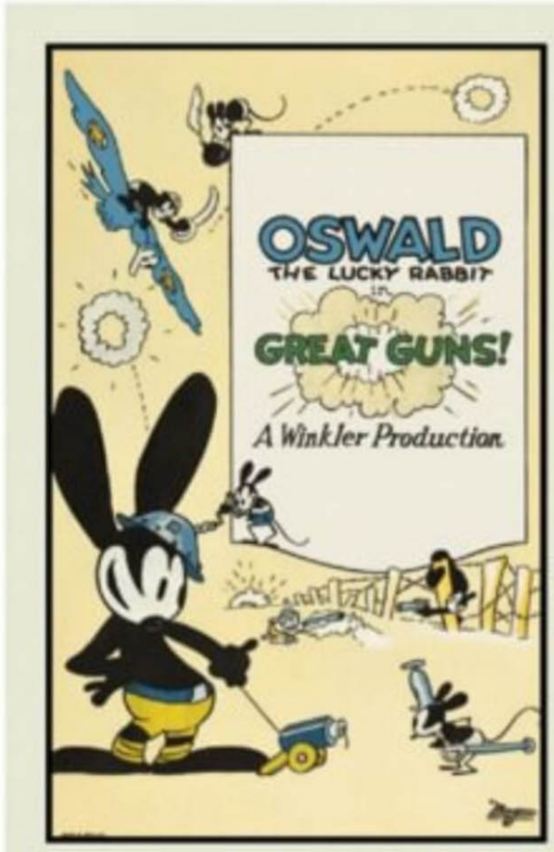
As Roy worked to secure funds, the staff grew, with Walt recruiting some of his old crew from Missouri and hiring local artists. In the spring of 1925, Roy married Kansas City sweetheart Edna Francis. In July, Walt wed Lillian Bounds, who worked at the studio inking and painting the celluloid sheets. In early 1926, the firm settled into a white-stuccoed studio on Hyperion Avenue in the Silver Lake neighborhood. By then Disney Brothers Studios made a new Alice short every 16 days, with Walt leaving the illustrations to others. "Iwerks's special talent at that time was animation," J.B. Kaufman, who cowrote *Walt in Wonderland: The Silent Films of Walt Disney*, tells LIFE. "And Walt perceived pretty early that his own major talents were more in the area of story and direction. He withdrew from animation within the first year of the Alice series and focused on direction and story and recruited more animators." Realizing that it would be better to just have one name on the firm, Roy and Walt renamed it the Walt Disney Studio.

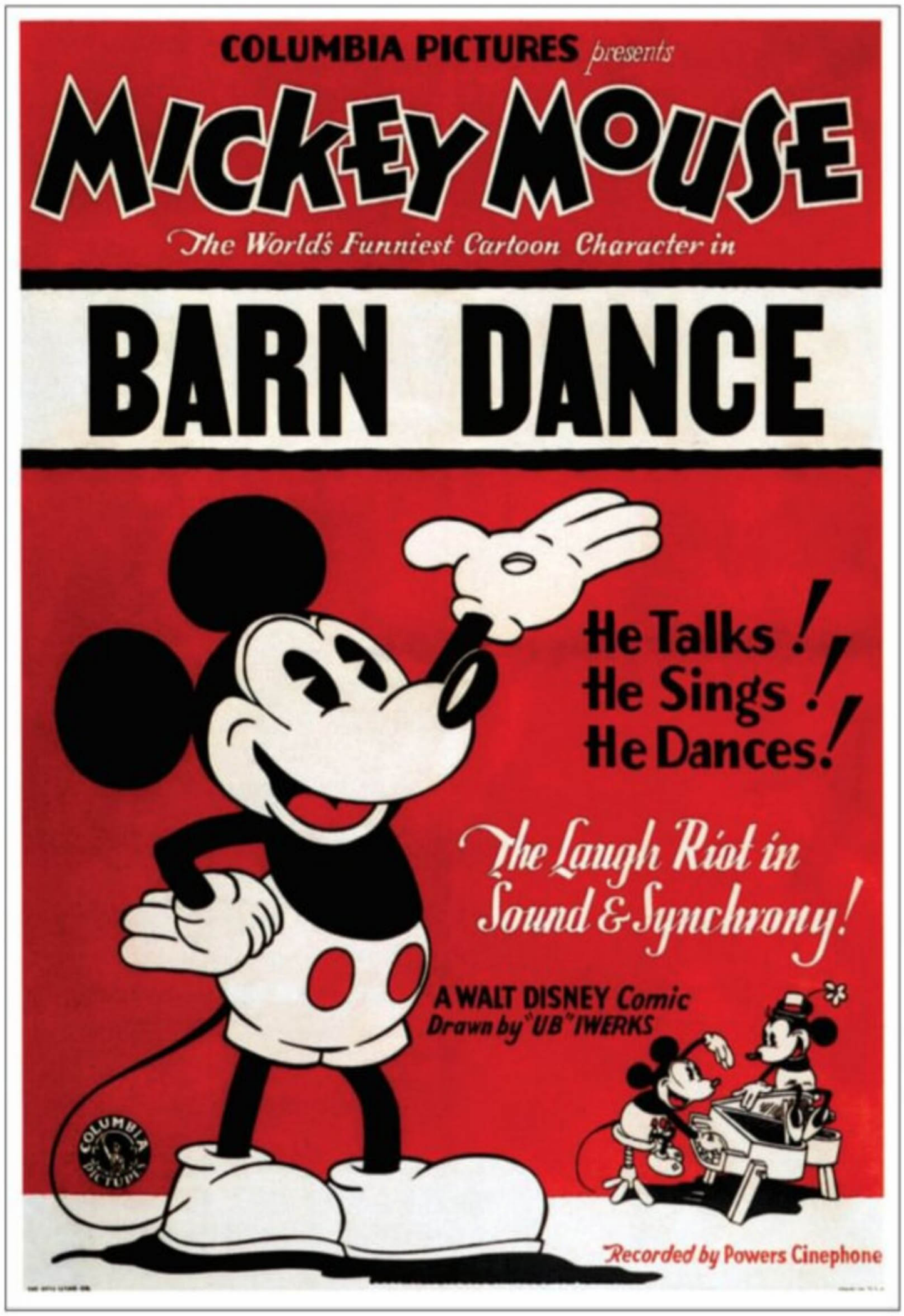
By then Winkler had turned much of the work and distribution over to her new husband, Charles Mintz. The Disney studio was far from having the only animators around. It had some serious competition. Fleischer Studios was having success with its Out of the Inkwell films, as were Pat Sullivan and Otto Messmer with their Felix the Cat shorts, and Bill Nolan with Krazy Kat

and the foul-tempered mouse, Ignatz. Mintz wanted Walt to create something different to draw audiences. Walt tapped into his love of animals, and he and Ub created Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. Ub illustrated the bunny while Walt wrote the story and gags. Mintz contracted two dozen episodes for Universal Pictures, and in September 1927 they released *Trolley Troubles*, in which Oswald conducts a trolley that takes him and his passengers on a *hare*-raising ride. The short is crisp and full of anarchy, the drawings sharp, with the saucer-eyed Oswald sporting a free and loose look. The jaunty, anthropomorphized rabbit proved a hit. The film industry trade paper *Moving Picture World* gushed how Oswald had "accomplished the astounding feat of jumping into the first-run favor overnight."

Just as Walt and Roy worked well together, so did Walt and Ub. "Ub was basically a shy guy, a tinkerer. Walt was the go-getter," says Apgar. The studio churned out shorts, making one every two weeks. "It was that constant striving for quality that really set them apart from the start," says Kaufman. The films did well, and in 1928 Walt and Lillian headed to New York seeking a raise. Mintz, though, understood the value of Oswald. While Disney created Oswald, Universal owned the

**THE DISNEY BROTHERS Cartoon Studio made its first modest home on Kingswell Avenue in Hollywood. Not long after moving to bigger digs on Hyperion, Walt and Iwerks (front row far left, next to Walt, and this page, right) created Oswald the Lucky Rabbit.**






**WITH OSWALD OUT OF THE picture, Walt turned his attention to developing a new signature character that would be all his own. Following Mickey Mouse's debut in 1928's *Steamboat Willie*, Disney released the short *Barn Dance* (left) in 1929, one of 12 featuring Mickey made that year. The firm was also a trailblazer in its use of music, including its Silly Symphonies (opposite), which premiered that year, too.**

rights to the rabbit. Mintz received the contract to create additional films and hired away many of Walt's animators.

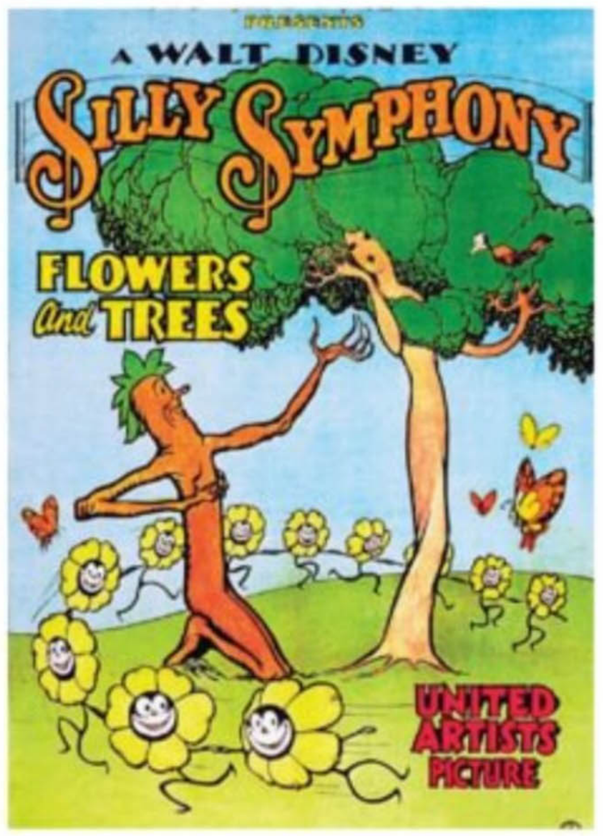
Crushed, Walt wired the news to Roy. As he headed back to Los Angeles, he decided that from then on he would always own his work. Along the way he thought of how to replace Oswald. Walt told conflicting stories over the years, but in a 1959 interview he said he realized: "I'd fooled around a lot with little mice, and they were always cute characters, and they hadn't been overdone in the picture field. They'd been used but never featured. So, well, I decided it would be a mouse."

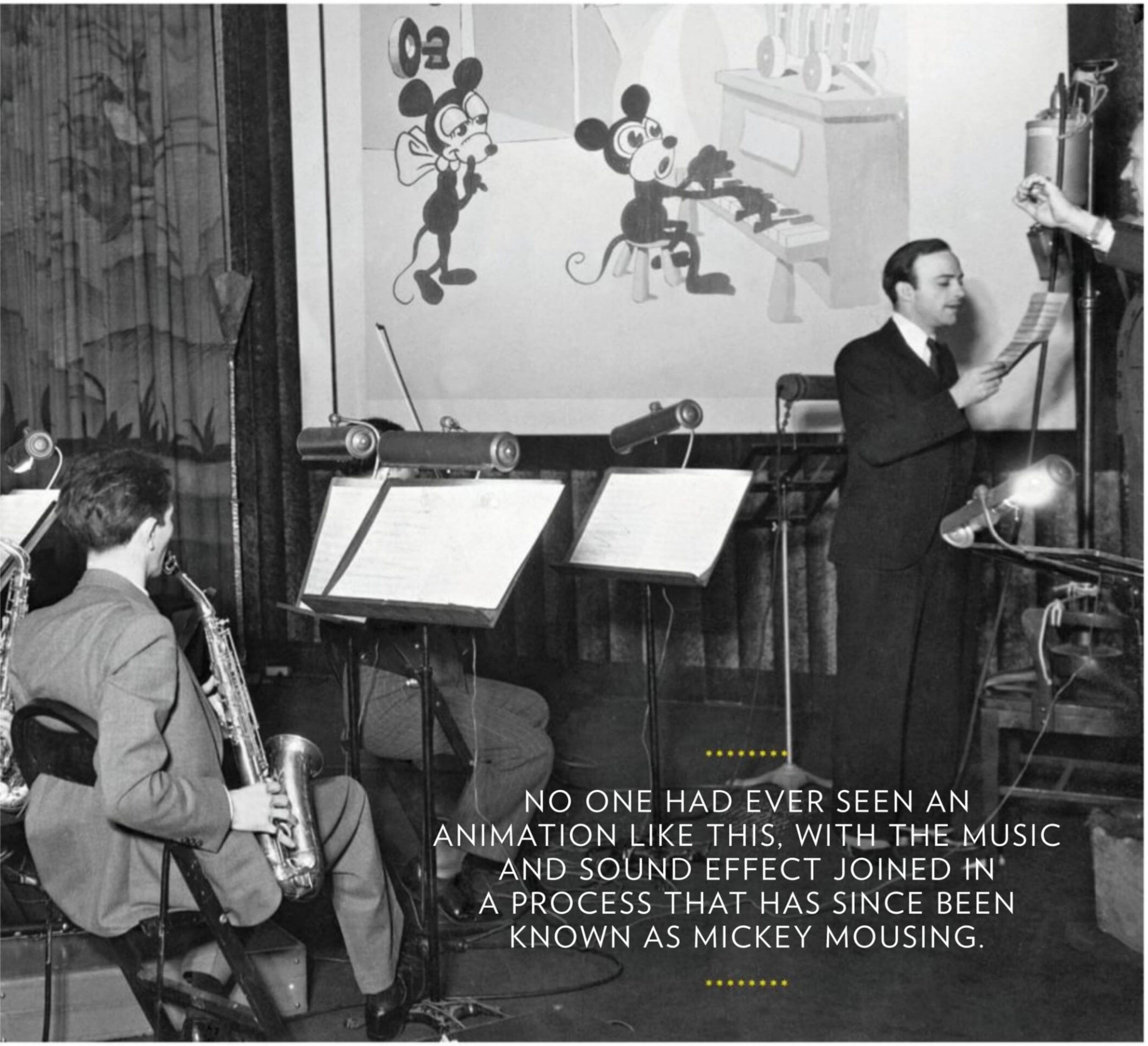
What he needed was a distinct appearance for his mouse, and the staff looked through magazines and ads for inspiration, with Walt and Ub playing with different looks. Ub then drew a creature that changed the face of animation: "Pear-shaped body, ball on top, couple of thin legs. If you gave it long ears, it was a rabbit. Short ears, it was a cat. Ears hanging down, a dog… With an elongated nose, it became a mouse," he later said. Walt dubbed him Mortimer, but Lillian told him, "Mortimer is a horrible name for a mouse!" She suggested Mickey, and the mouse was christened.

Worried that someone might steal their new character, Ub single-handedly churned out some 700 drawings a day,

animating *Plane Crazy*, an homage to Charles Lindbergh, who had just flown solo across the Atlantic. It did fairly well in test screenings, but MGM passed. So they then created *Gallopin' Gaucho*, a parody of Douglas Fairbanks's *The Gaucho*. They had trouble finding a distributor for that one, too. Back in October 1927, Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer* debuted. This, the first successful movie with synchronized sound, revolutionized the movie business. Realizing that they should add sound to the short, Walt and Ub took their third Mickey film, *Steamboat Willie*, and with animator Wilfred Jackson synched it up to music. In the film, Mickey pilots a river boat, and as "Turkey in the Straw" plays, he and Minnie turn the assorted farmyard animals on board into musical instruments by cranking the goat's tail, squeezing the duck's belly, and tapping on the bull's teeth.

Walt secured a two-week run at



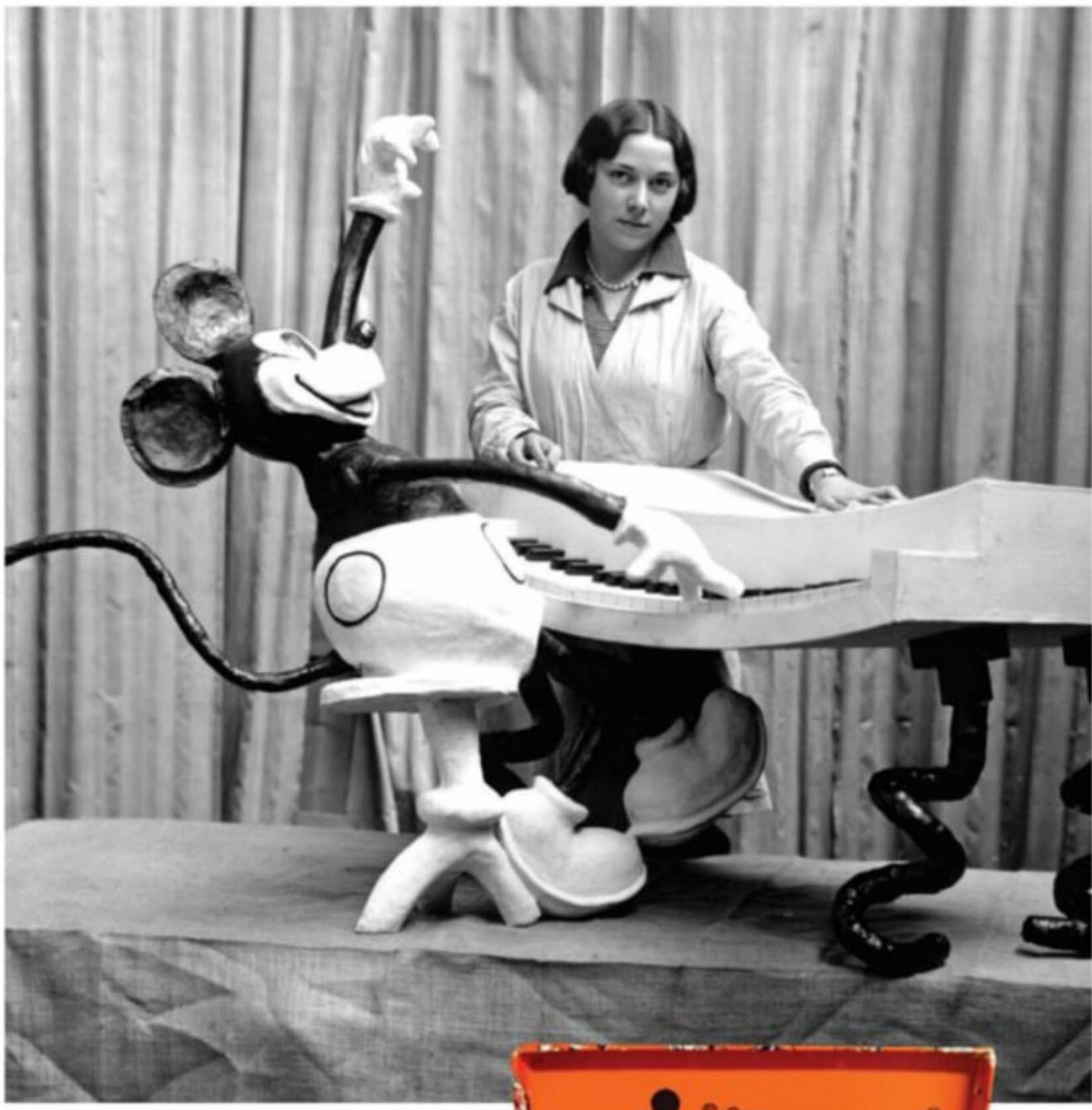
NO ONE HAD EVER SEEN AN ANIMATION LIKE THIS, WITH THE MUSIC AND SOUND EFFECT JOINED IN A PROCESS THAT HAS SINCE BEEN KNOWN AS MICKEY MOUSING.

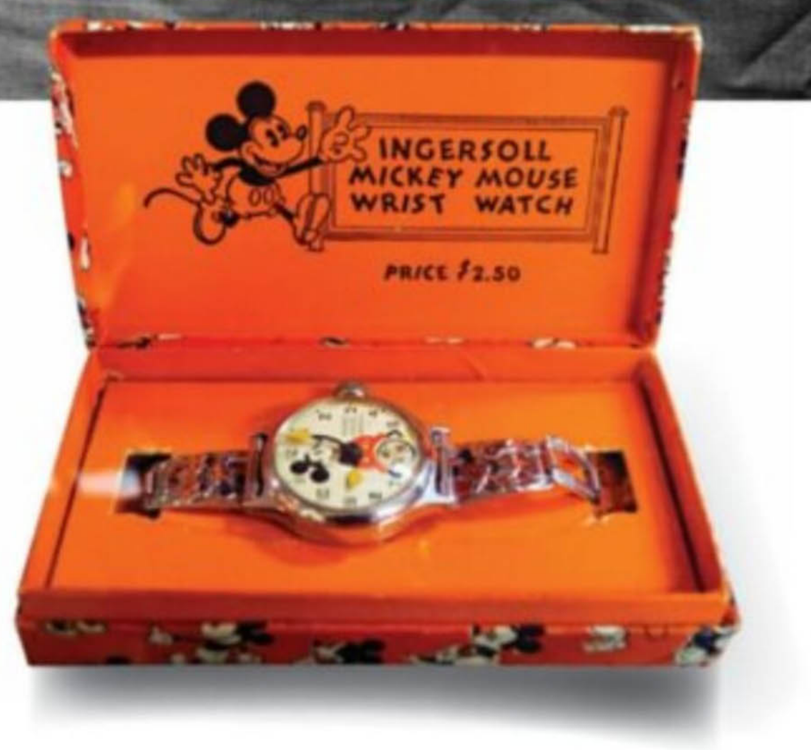
the Colony Theater on Broadway and 53rd Street in New York City, and on November 18, 1928, the world met Mickey and Minnie Mouse. No one had ever seen an animation like this, with the music and sound effects joined in a process that has since been known as Mickey Mousing. The organist Carl Stalling, whom Walt had commissioned while at Laugh-O-gram, joined his friend at the Colony and recalled the audiences' response: "We sat in almost the last row and heard laughs and snickers all around us." More important, the press took note, with the *New York Times* calling *Steamboat Willie* "an ingenious piece of work with a good deal of fun. It growls, whines, squeaks, and makes various other sounds that add to its mirthful quality." Walt had Stalling add sound to *Plane Crazy* and *The Gallopin' Goucho*, and they started making more films. "He's all but frantic to get more cartoons out there while they have this edge that nobody else has discovered yet," says Kaufman.

In no time Walt and Ub's basic two-dimensional drawing became a star. How could Mickey *not* be? The mouse was a subtle charmer and savvy survivor, a character who was the best of Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin rolled into one. In *The Karnival Kid* he spoke his first words, "Hot dogs! Hot dogs!," with Stalling uttering that fateful falsetto phrase. (Walt would later take over voicing Mickey.) A dozen more Mickey films appeared the next year with the nervous, chain-smoking studio head ensuring the success of his confident and cheerful alter ego. As the nation plunged into the Great Depression in the fall of 1929, Mickey became a balm for a battered America, an innocent and often unsophisticated naïf with a rebellious spirit. He is imbued with the archetype of American can-do spirit, refuses to buckle under adversity, and gets the girl before the movie is through. Walt had a feel for the needs of Americans, and Mickey appealed to those needs in nearly 50 films from 1929 through 1932.

Fans couldn't get enough of him, and in December 1929, theater owner David E. Dow launched the first Mickey Mouse Club at the Elsinor Theatre in Salem, Oregon. Other theaters followed, and soon there were more than a million members. In January 1930, King Features Syndicate brought out the first Mickey Mouse comic strip. Irving Caesar, who wrote such hits as "Just a Gigolo," immortalized him in the 1932 song "What! No Mickey Mouse? (What Kind of a Party Is This?)." And Mickey and Minnie weren't alone. Along the way, they made friends, a group that has since been dubbed the Sensational Six. Pluto bounded on screen in 1930. Goofy lumbered along in 1932. Donald Duck first squawked in 1934. And Daisy charmed her way into hearts in 1940.

With such a success, Walt sought more ways to promote his business. He met with merchandising executive Herman "Kay" Kamen to see if he could promote Mickey. Kamen signed on to license Mickey, Minnie, and the other characters, and soon fans snapped up everything from masks to wristwatches. Two years later, a 40-foot-tall






**BY THE 1930s, MICKEY WAS such a beloved household name that he earned a spot in the annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade (opposite) and a waxwork at Madame Tussauds in London (above). Mickey merch became popular too, with his likeness popping up on watches, plushes, and more.**

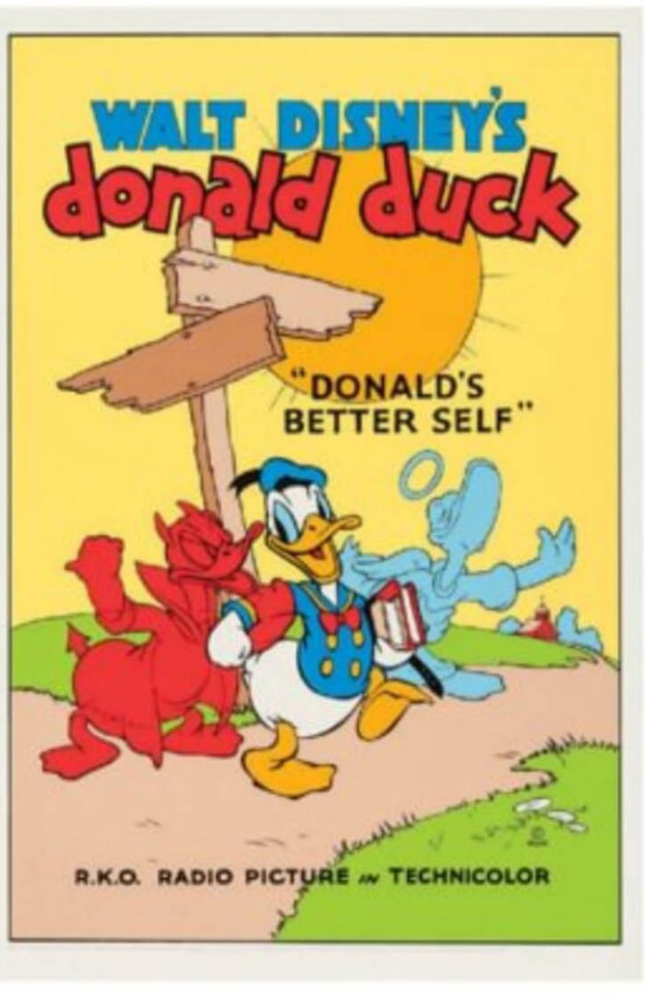
**ADRIANA CASELOTTI WAS 18 when she was cast as Snow White in the studio's first full-length animated feature, a role for which she earned a meager $970. A year after the hit's release, Disney technicians (opposite) worked on sound effects, and the short *Donald's Better Self* debuted.**

Mickey floated down New York's Broadway in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Mickey also became an international star, with a waxwork created for Madame Tussauds in London.

As the studio's success expanded, they knew they had to make other types of shorts. Stalling suggested what became known as Silly Symphonies, films with music as the motivating element. He had developed the click track, which set marks on the film that offered timings for sounds and allowed for a more accurate merging of visuals and music for the first short, *The Skeleton Dance*. Stalling wrote a foxtrot using passages from Edvard Grieg's "March of the Dwarfs," while Ub created what Kaufman calls a "tour de force," with its dancing, twirling, and spinning creatures using their bones to play the music. Joseph Barbera, who with William Hanna would form Hanna-Barbera and make such cartoon favorites as *The Flintstones*, watched the film at the Roxy Theatre in New York and recalled in his autobiography *My Life in 'Toons*, "I saw these skeletons dancing in a row and in unison and I asked myself: How do you do that?"

Work became more formalized, and as the company grew, Walt firmly oversaw artistic decisions. He had final say on every film, something that Ub as his partner was not happy about. Soon Walt bought Ub out, and Ub formed the Ub Iwerks Studio and made the Flip the Frog and Willie Whopper films.

By then, Walt and Lillian hoped to start a family. Lillian became pregnant in the spring of 1931 but she miscarried, and the loss of his child and the pressures of the business caused Walt to slip into a depression. "I had a hell of a breakdown. I went all to pieces," he wrote. His doctor told him he needed to get away, and he and Lillian headed out on their first vacation, visiting Washington D.C., and traveling down to Key West and Cuba. He exercised, took horseback rides, played golf, started




playing polo and was soon rejuvenated.

While back to his old self, he still worked too hard but tried to ensure that his business was a friendly place. He offered drawing classes and brought in experts to lecture on art, and the staff played volleyball and baseball. By 1934, the Hyperion offices had nearly 200 people. Walt turned the studio into an artists' atelier, a place to learn and train. Those showing talent and hoping to become studio animators would first work in the In-Between Department, where they filled in frames between the top animators' key drawings. "That part of the work is the real drudgery," says Kaufman. "But the people who really distinguished themselves doing that were the ones who rose through the ranks and got to be full animators." Those top jobs went to the men. Women only earned spots doing ink and paint. One of those was Virginia Davis, the original Alice, who went on to do voices in *Pinocchio*.

In 1932 Walt learned of Technicolor's new three-color process, with its vivid colors, and struck a deal with the firm for its more advanced system, thus preventing competitors from using it. At the time, the studio had already created the *Flowers and Trees* Silly Symphony film in black and white, so the ink and paint artists had to wash off the reverse side of each cel and then repaint them. When the film premiered, audiences were stunned by its beauty, with the local paper in Chillicothe, west of Marceline, writing how the short "turned out to be as colorful as an old-time garden, as fresh as the first breath of spring and as charming as Peter Pan."

But Walt sought to do more than make short films. By the start of the '30s, "you can see just this gorgeous range of visual effects that they can do," says Kaufman. "They're turning out these polished little masterpieces. But they are limited to one reel. Walt's whole nature was to kind of rebel against limitations. He always wanted to go beyond what was perceived as the limit. It wasn't in his nature to think small." Walt loved the Grimms' fairy tale *Snow White* and announced to the staff that he intended to make a full-length animated version of the story, one filled with natural realism.

The studio got busy putting together the film. They had invented storyboarding, the creation of sketches of scenes that breaks down the movie's actions, while making 1933's *Three Little Pigs*, and applied the system to *Snow*

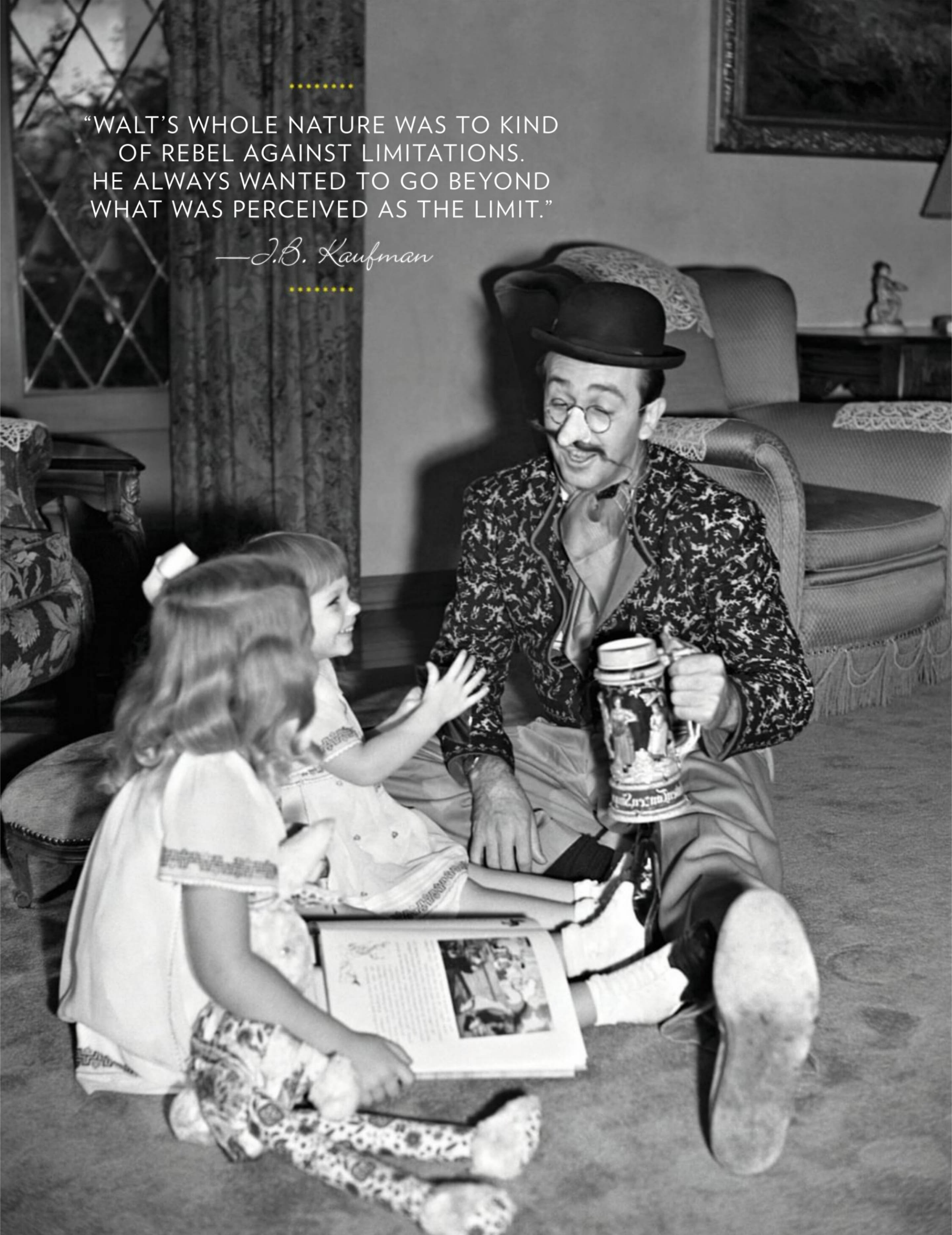
**THE 1939 SHORT *GOOFY AND Wilbur* was the first to feature the jovial canine in a solo role, sans Mickey. An exterior shot of Disney's Hyperion offices (top)—an upgrade from their original home on Kingswell—and a peek inside (opposite) shows where cameramen and inkers were hard at work.**

*White*. "Disney could shift around the individual drawings, which are pinned to a board," says Apgar, with Barrier adding, "*Snow White* is so thought out so carefully from almost frame by frame. There's no slovenliness, no short cuts involved."

Walt was especially interested in the individuality of each character and birthed personality animation, displaying the characteristics of a figure by the way he or she acted. Walt had his crew film a dancer acting out Snow White's parts so the animators could observe her movements. For the dwarfs and the other characters, they studied actors' facial expressions. Close-ups could take a day to illustrate. As Kaufman notes, much of Walt's success came from doing the hard work: "If they were after an effect and they didn't get exactly what they were after the first time, they would do it over and over and over and find different ways to do it until they did get that effect."

*Snow White* needed more than 200,000 separate drawings. And to add realism, William Garity developed a new multiplane camera, a 12-foot-tall device that offered greater depth and a wider sense of spatiality. Jimmy MacDonald, meanwhile, created the sounds, from the yodeling of the dwarfs to using a leather wallet to create the effect of creaking floorboards. Such an attention to detail meant slow progress, and *Snow White* was soon over budget. But it didn't matter. Roy Disney kept the project funded. "If Walt wants to do something, Roy is committed to finding a way to make it work financially and business-wise," says Kaufman.

The labor was worth it: When *Snow White* premiered on December 21, 1937, at Los Angeles's Carthay Circle Theatre, the audience laughed at the antics of the Seven Dwarfs, hissed the Evil Queen, and fell silent and wept when Snow White died. At the end, the audience gave it a standing ovation. As a


"WALT'S WHOLE NATURE WAS TO KIND
OF REBEL AGAINST LIMITATIONS.
HE ALWAYS WANTED TO GO BEYOND
WHAT WAS PERCEIVED AS THE LIMIT."
—J.B. Kaufman

**LILLIAN GAVE BIRTH TO THE Disneys' first daughter, Diane (opposite, left), in 1933. Three years later, the couple adopted their second daughter Sharon (opposite, right). In 1939, Walt and brother Roy took a trip to Waikiki (above), where the younger Disney gamely played the ukulele as his brother filmed him.**

child, it was the first film *Time* magazine critic Richard Schickel saw and he recalled that "it was wonderful." Walt had with this film created a new art form, one capable of encompassing important issues and mythology, something historian Barrier calls "a renaissance, a cultural and artistic explosion." *Snow White* raked in $8 million its first year—$169 million in 2023 dollars—and earned Walt a cover of *Time*. The tunes "Heigh-Ho" and "Someday My Prince Will Come" became hits.

Despite Walt's wish that his work would be taken seriously, *Snow White* was not nominated for a Best Picture Academy Award, instead earning the following year a special Oscar for "a significant screen innovation." Even so, the film's success emboldened Walt. He didn't want to make cartoons anymore. He sought to make art, and the firm launched a period of experimentation and special effects, as they set out to produce a feature film every six months.

Walt started to produce *Pinocchio* yet struggled with how to make the character—who in the 19th century folktale by Carlo Collodi is unpleasant—more likeable. In Walt's version, Pinocchio becomes sweet and naive, and Jiminy Cricket—whom the original Pinocchio kills—the film's moral conscience. Ward Kimball was tasked with the job of designing Jiminy. He originally made him insect-like but was not happy with the look. Nor was Walt, who told him, "Ah, it's too ugly!" Stripping away the insect features, Kimball ended up with what he termed a blob, saying, "It is not a cricket, it is a blob. It is a little man-creature with no ears, and he wears little English outfits, and the only reminiscence of a cricket's wings are the tails of his coat!"

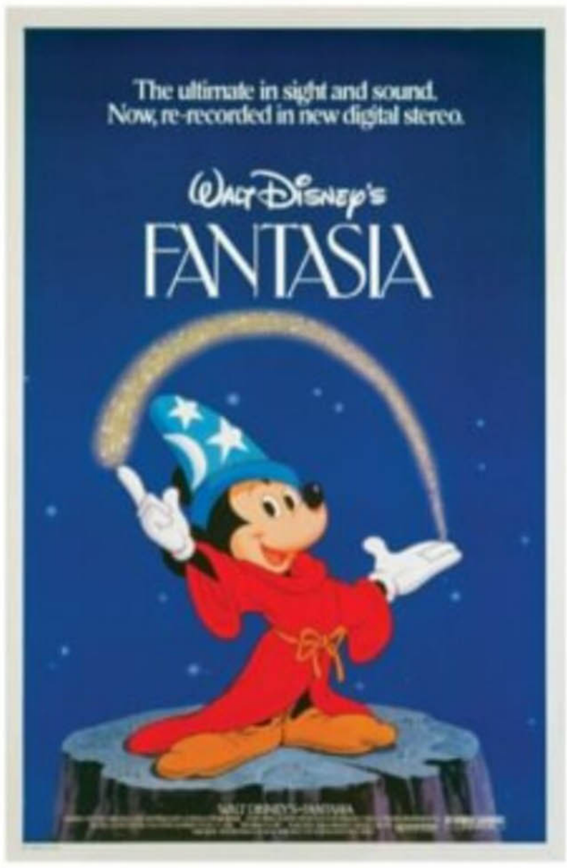
As he and the other animators worked on their characters, they were assisted by the modeling department, which prepared miniatures to help the artists see how things moved. The studio increased the use of the multiplane camera throughout to give great depth to the images, and animator Sandy Strother created the first realistic

underwater effects. The resulting film is much darker and more detailed than *Snow White* and is arguably Walt's greatest. When it came out, critics raved. *Time* magazine wrote: "In craftsmanship and delicacy of drawing and coloring, in the articulation of its dozens of characters, in the greater variety and depth of its photographic effects, it tops the high standard *Snow White* set." Yet while the song "When You Wish Upon a Star" became a hit, and the film won two Oscars for its music, the film at that point did not earn back its investment.

As Walt worked on *Pinocchio*, he toyed with the idea of adapting Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 1797 poem "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," about a sorcerer who goes away, and his young assistant decides to see what magic he can do. Walt enticed Philadelphia Orchestra conductor Leopold Stokowski to work with him, and the idea soon morphed into a full-length film, with the pair picking symphonies while the studio crafted stories. As Walt worked, he sought inspiration by discussing his project with composer Igor Stravinsky, choreographer George Balanchine, and astronomer Edwin Hubble.

With so much ambition, the growing staff at Walt Disney Studios topped 1,000, and in 1938 the studio bought a 51-acre lot in Burbank, where they created an artistic city. Soon there was a three-story animation building with sunlit rooms, a soda fountain, tunnels connecting buildings, a cafeteria, and air-conditioning. By then, expenses were skyrocketing, and World War II, which had started in Europe that September, meant the end of the European market. They needed money, and Roy pushed for them to go public. In April 1940, the firm issued 155,000 shares of preferred stock and raised nearly $3.9 million.

The money went to good use because *Fantasia* had become quite an ambitious undertaking: a series of films with different artistic styles, from abstract to realistic, set to pieces of classical music by Bach, Tchaikovsky, and




**THE EARLY 1940s WERE A creatively (if not financially) successful period for Walt Disney Studios. The company released *Pinocchio* (top, being inked onto a cel) in February 1940, followed by the epic movie musical *Fantasia* (above) in November of the same year. Both lost the studio money but became classics.**

# MUSIC AND LYRICISTS

Meet the talented folks who have given Disney productions their signature sounds throughout the years.

## RICHARD AND ROBERT SHERMAN

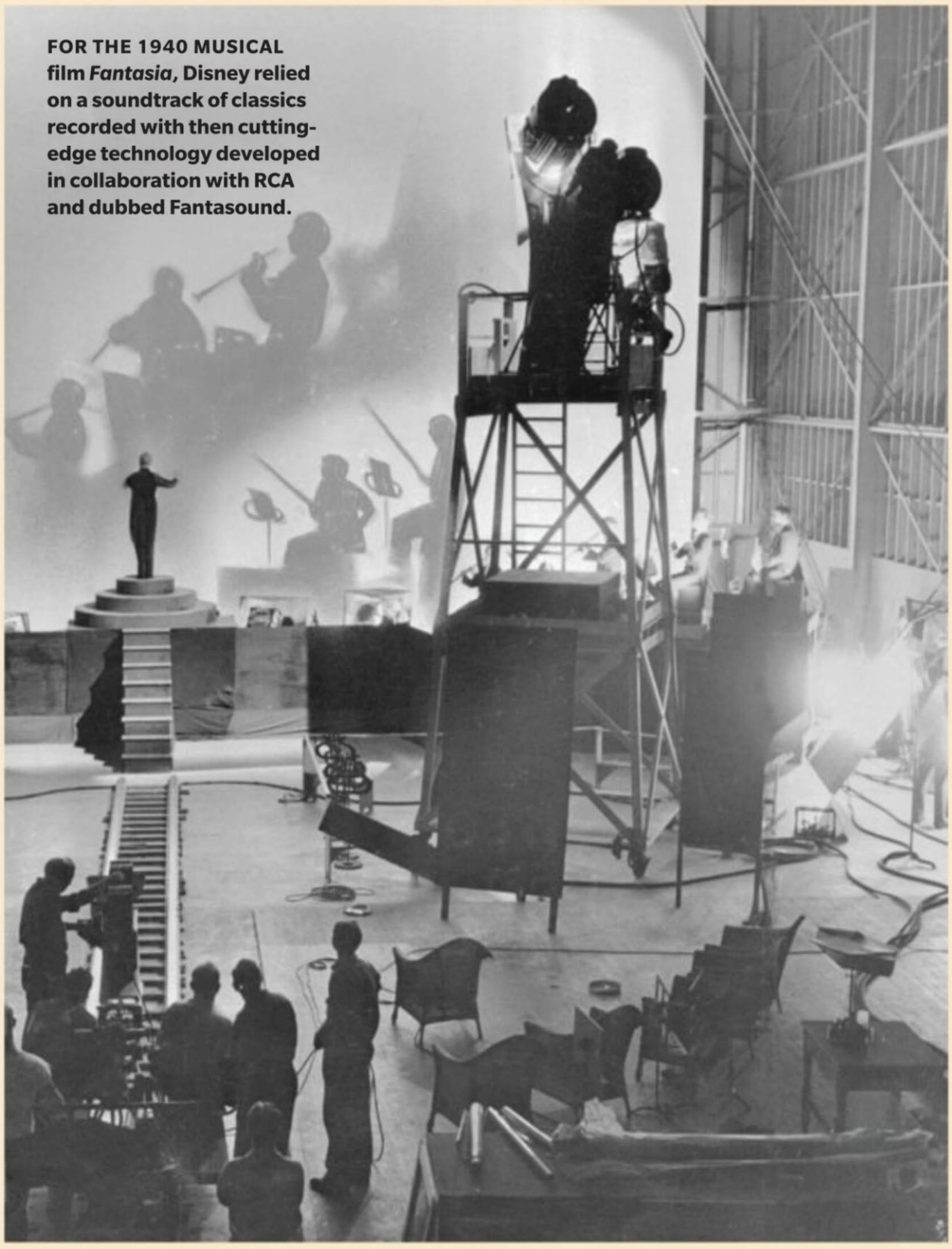
After they wrote 1958's "Tall Paul" for former Mouseketeer Annette Funicello—a Top 10 Billboard hit—brothers Richard and Robert Sherman caught the ear of Walt Disney. From their 1964 tune "It's a Small World," which has played tens of millions of times since boats first slipped through Disney parks rides, to their "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" for 1964's *Mary Poppins* (it peaked at 66 on the Billboard Hot 100), the Shermans effortlessly turned out songs. In total, they composed more than 200 for 27 Disney films and two dozen television shows, including the music for 1961's *The Parent Trap*, 1967's *The Jungle Book*, and the entire Winnie the Pooh series.

## ALAN MENKEN, HOWARD ASHMAN, TIM RICE, AND ELTON JOHN

As composer Alan Menken said, "Songs are a very familiar vocabulary to people," and he and his colleagues have been using their tunes to speak to audiences for years. With lyricist Howard Ashman, Menken wrote the music for 1989's *The Little Mermaid* and 1991's *Beauty and the Beast*. Ashman passed away while they were creating 1992's *Aladdin*, so Menken teamed up with Tim Rice to complete the film. The partners then wrote the 1997 oratorio *King David*—the inaugural production at Disney's refurbished New Amsterdam Theatre. Rice also worked with Elton John on 1994's *The Lion King* as well as the Tony-winning musical *Aida*, a Disney production that premiered on Broadway in 2000.

## MICHAEL GIACCHINO

Michael Giacchino started at Disney composing for video games like Mickey Mania and Gargoyles. He soon graduated to TV on J.J. Abrams's 2001 series *Alias* and 2004 series *Lost*; soundtracks for Disney rides, such as Space Mountain; and the music for 2004's *The Incredibles*, 2007's *Ratatouille*, and 2009's *Up*, for which he won an Academy Award. Giacchino has clearly been busy: In 2016 he composed the score for Marvel's *Doctor Strange* as well as *Zootopia* and *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*. He also created the music for 2017's *Coco*, the Tom Holland Spider-Man films, and 2022's *Lightyear* and *Thor: Love and Thunder*.



**FOR THE 1940 MUSICAL film *Fantasia*, Disney relied on a soundtrack of classics recorded with then cutting-edge technology developed in collaboration with RCA and dubbed Fantasound.**

**FROM SKETCHING LINES TO** walking the picket lines: Disney artists went on strike in 1941 after Walt refused to support their unionization efforts. His brother Roy would later settle with the union while Walt was out of town on a goodwill trip to South America.

others. Artists developed transparent paints to give it an ethereal look as they sought to tap into emotions through the imagery, while Garity developed Fantasound, a four-track audio system that required 64 loudspeakers to be installed in a theater. As he told the *New Yorker*, "The music will rotate around every person in the audience instead of coming directly at them."

Only 12 theaters spent the $38,000 for the system, so most audiences could not appreciate the music's lushness. Critics were divided. Like *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia* lost money, and Disney's stock dropped from $25 a share to $4. Walt needed a hit. But at the same time, there was turmoil in 'Toon Town. Many complained of the hierarchical nature at his company as well as the low pay, with the female inkers making just $16 to $20 a week, much less than their male colleagues.

The Screen Cartoonists Guild had formed in 1937 and sought to unionize the studios. Walt became incensed when he heard that the guild was organizing workers. In February 1941, he called the staff and tried to defuse the situation by admitting the studio was in financial trouble, denying there was a class system among employees and explaining the organization was too big for him to devote individual attention to everyone. It didn't work. Many were appalled by Walt's tone. It wasn't just those earning low wages who were outraged. Art Babbitt, who created Goofy and was a main animator, joined his colleagues in challenging the boss. Walt fired him, and soon hundreds of workers, including nearly half the art department, took to the picket lines. Some hoisted signs with Jiminy Cricket warning "Taint Cricket to Pass a Picket" or Pluto chiding "I'd Rather be a Dog Than a Scab."

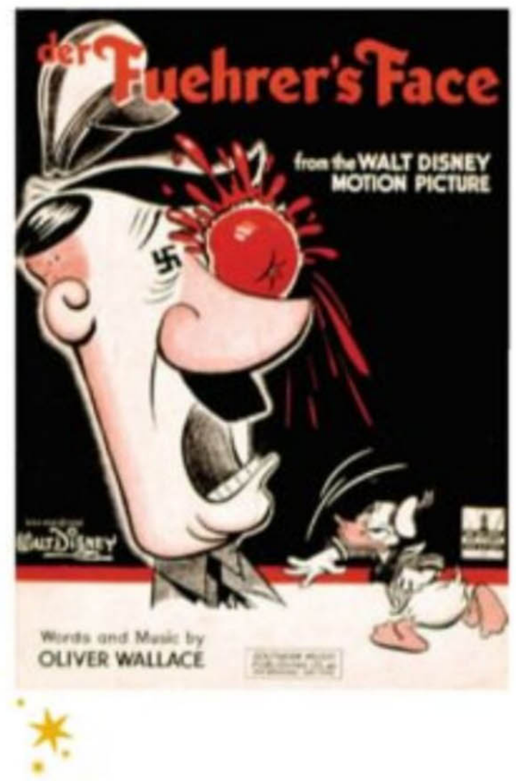
Walt refused to recognize the guild or understand its motivations. He even took out an ad in *Variety* blaming communist agitators. Ultimately, though, he would be away on a goodwill trip to South America when Roy settled with the union. When Walt returned, he felt

that the studio was no longer like family to him.

He did, though, have a hit film. In October 1941, *Dumbo* debuted, with its lovely, simplified cartoon style, and Bosley Crowther at the *New York Times* raved, "Ladeez and gentlemen, step right this way—to the Broadway Theatre, that is—and see the most genial, the most endearing, the most completely precious cartoon feature film ever to emerge from the magical brushes of Walt Disney's wonder-working artists!" Three weeks after its premier, the firm handed out $25,000 in wage adjustments to members of the Screen Cartoonists Guild.

In August 1942, the studio released *Bambi*, its most ambitious film at that point. It had the Maine Wildlife Development Commission ship two fawns so the artists could watch them grow as they rendered the naturalistic beauty of the world—a look that contrasts with *Snow White*'s lovely storybook style. It was also a dark film—early on Bambi's mother is killed—and earned mixed reviews and box office.

*Snow White*, *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia*, *Dumbo*, and *Bambi*—now known as the Big Five—are considered classics, but with the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the United States entering World War II, funding for such movies dried up. The studio shelved many of its projects and started to create government war propaganda and training films. Ub Iwerks's business slowed and he returned to Disney in 1940, improving technology, heading up the new photographic effects lab, and helping the firm develop educational films. Disney also made lighter, though equally propaganda-filled, fare such as *Donald Gets Drafted*. Like the Allied forces fighting in Europe and Asia, the studio did what it could to not only survive but succeed.




**WALT MADE SURE HIS company aided in the war effort during World War II, devising paraphernalia (including the Mickey gas mask design, top) and making films—both educational, such as the training film he discussed with Lt. J.C. Hutchinson (opposite), and animated, like the short *Der Fuehrer's Face*, in which Donald Duck has a nightmare that he's living in Nazi Germany.**

2
BREAKING
GLIDE
TOO SOON
3
6

100 YEARS

*Chapter 3*

# A GROWING KINGDOM

First they ventured into television; then they reinvented how Americans spent their leisure time.

**Walt Disney in 1961 hosting his NBC series *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color.***

Walt Disney's
WONDERFUL
WORLD OF COLOR

BLANCO

THE WHITE STALLION

INTRODUCES..

**WITH THE WAR OVER,** the Disney studio got back to making films. In 1946, it released *Song of the South*. Based on the post–Civil War Uncle Remus stories that Walt Disney had heard as a child in Missouri, the movie combined live actors with animation, which made it cheaper to produce. Though Walt had contacted African American leaders to plumb their views on discussions of race in a nation on the precipice of the Civil Rights movement, he ended up relying on racist stereotypes, with the film offering deeply offensive portrayals of formerly enslaved people. When *Song of the South* opened in Atlanta in 1946, the lead performer James Baskett did not attend. African Americans who wanted to view the film had to sit in the crow's nest of the balcony and enter through a separate entrance. At its New York premier, protestors at Times Square's Palace Theater hoisted placards reading "We fought for Uncle Sam, not Uncle Tom."

Walt, meanwhile, continued his battles with the union and was getting serious competition. Some of those who left Disney at the time of the strike formed United Productions of America in 1943. At UPA, artists like former Disney animator John Hubley made the nearsighted Mr. Magoo films. At the same time, Warner Bros. bought Leon Schlesinger Productions in 1944,

and the studio continued to turn out the successful Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and Porky Pig cartoons, and added new characters such as Pepé Le Pew and the Road Runner.

Walt knew he had to try something new and diversify his offerings. In 1950, the studio released its first live-action movie, *Treasure Island*, which the *New Yorker* praised as "a full-length, rip-roaring, absolutely first-class" film. And it started making nature documentaries, with the first, *Seal Island*, released in 1948, winning an Academy Award and launching the studio's True-Life adventures series. Walt wanted to make more animated features, but ever-frugal Roy said it was too expensive. Of course, he eventually agreed to what his brother wanted and raised $2 million for *Cinderella*. When it opened in 1950, it proved to be a hit, earning $8 million.

The studio chief appreciated the financial cushion but was tired from work. Depressed and suffering from what he called his DDs, "disillusionment and discouragement," he feared that the high point of his career had passed a decade earlier with *Snow White*. His voice was going because of his chain smoking, and after voicing Mickey since 1929, he turned the role over to soundman Jimmy MacDonald. He also suffered from pain from a fall off of a polo horse in 1938 that had crushed four cervical vertebrae. At the time he had opted to see a chiropractor instead of a doctor, and as a result his injury never properly healed, causing calcium deposits to build up in his neck and resulting in arthritis.

He found it therapeutic to play with a train set he had constructed in his office, and it quickly developed into more than a distraction. Trains served as a talisman for Walt, a reminder of his idyllic childhood in Marceline, a link to what he saw as a vanishing America. "You can't overlook the importance of trains in the life of the country and trains in Walt's life," observes Disney historian Michael Barrier. "Back in the late 19th century, trains linked the country. Trains were magic carpets."

**A PIONEER OF STORYBOARDING, Walt (above) examined scenes from 1946's controversial *Song of the South* with musician Johnny Mercer, whose version of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" became a top 10 hit. Actor James Baskett, who played Uncle Remus in the film, received an honorary Oscar in 1948, presented by Ingrid Bergman. He was the first Black man to earn an Academy Award.**

Needing time off, Walt decided to attend a train convention in the fall of 1948 and headed to the Chicago Railroad Fair with Jiminy Cricket animator and fellow train enthusiast Ward Kimball. There the two men were feted, got to run a few of the old engines, and of course blow the horn. In Chicago, Walt had a chance to relive memories of Marceline. When he returned west, he sought to recreate this vanished period and built a large scale model train in Burbank.

Refreshed, Walt needed to come up with a way to expand his company and looked into the possibilities of television. The medium had only recently been born; in 1946, Americans owned about 7,000 TV sets. But fueled by postwar prosperity and growing families, more were being purchased, with the number rising to 5 million in 1950. And the networks—ABC, NBC, CBS, and DuMont Television—sought to expand the sort of programing they offered.

Seeking to promote their new *Alice in Wonderland* film, Walt agreed to make *One Hour in Wonderland* for NBC. The 1950 Christmas show featured ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and his sidekicks Charlie McCarthy and Mortimer Snerd. As the host, Walt showed clips of his films and a sneak peek of *Alice*. The show was a hit, with 90 percent of the viewing audience tuning in. Celebrity columnist Hedda Hopper raved, "After seeing it, I know why television was born."

While Walt contemplated further possibilities of television, he also thought about what he could do with his trains. The *New York Times*' Bosley Crowther recalled visiting him one day

**YEARS BEFORE DISNEY LEFT its mark on children's television programming, shows such as *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* (above, left)—which debuted in 1947 and starred Fran Allison, Burr Tillstrom, and a host of puppets—paved the way. Walt dipped his toes into the nascent medium in 1950 with *One Hour in Wonderland* on NBC, a Christmas special meant to promote *Alice in Wonderland*.**

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OF TELEVISION. THE MEDIUM
HAD ONLY RECENTLY BEEN BORN.

Walt Disney
PRESENTS
THE ACADEMY AWARD
SHORT FEATURE
TONS OF FANGED AND SAVAGE FURY . . . FIGHTING FOR A MATE!
Mighty "Beach-master" and invading "Bachelor" clash in mortal combat . . . as the Arctic's strangest mystery unfolds before your eyes!
"Seal Island"
A TRUE LIFE ADVENTURE
PHOTOGRAPHED ON THE PRIBILOF ISLANDS IN THE BERING SEA.
FILMED IN TECHNICOLOR

**THE COMPANY FURTHER diversified its offerings with True-Life Adventures, documentary shorts focused on nature. The first, 1948's *Seal Island* (left), won an Oscar for Best Short Subject. Live-action films also became a focus for Disney, with *Treasure Island*, starring Robert Newton and Bobby Driscoll (below), premiering in 1950. Of course, they never strayed too far from animation, releasing the classic *Cinderella* (far right) that same year.**

in Los Angeles and leaving perplexed by the activities of the studio boss: "He seemed totally disinterested in movies and wholly, almost weirdly, concerned with the building of a miniature railroad engine and a string of cars in the workshops of the studio. All of his zest for invention, for creating fantasies, seemed to be going into this plaything."

Along with real trains, Walt had long been fascinated with models and started making miniatures for his train. In 1950, the Disneys moved to the Los Angeles neighborhood of Holmby Hills. There Walt recreated his family's Marceline barn, and around the property laid out a half mile of tracks for what he dubbed the Carolwood Pacific Railroad, christening the locomotive the Lilly Belle. While he named the engine after his wife, Lillian would not let him run the line through the garden, so he made a tunnel underneath and laid it out with an S-curve. "It was the toy he never had as a little kid," commented *Time* magazine movie critic Richard Schickel. "It was something that was just pure fun and pleasure for him to do."

The train obsession was more than a midlife crisis. Trains were forming the seed of a larger plan: an amusement park. Roy initially opposed the building of a park, calling it one of "Walt's screwy ideas." But as he often did, he came around to his brother's desires. In 1952, Walt sold his Palm Springs vacation home, took out $100,000 against his life insurance policy, and formed a separate company called Walt Disney Enterprises, which became WED Enterprises, and assembled a staff to study how people acted in fairs. Mid-century parks were carnivalesque places with fast rides and odd shows. Lillian saw such places as unsafe, and Walt guaranteed her that his would be different. To make sure they did it right, WED studied places like the Los Angeles County Fair; Coney Island, New York; Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, Denmark; and Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park, California. They started work on what they initially called Mickey Mouse Village (and would soon be renamed Disneyland) and determined Anaheim, California, outside of Los Angeles, to be an ideal spot. There they purchased 160 acres of walnut and orange groves.

Now the problem was finding a way to pay for the more than $9 million construction project. Thankfully, Disney's *One Hour in Wonderland* had been a smash hit, making his firm a sought

after commodity. Each of the networks needed shows, and in the fall of 1953 Roy started negotiating the idea of airing a Disney-themed program, with the stipulation that the network also make an investment in Disneyland. NBC and CBS passed, but ABC said yes, agreeing to make a $500,000 investment and guarantee $4.5 million in loans so Walt could build the park. In return for their commitment and financial support, the network received a one-third ownership. As Walt said, "ABC needed the television show so damn bad they bought the amusement park."

The idea of the show was to create hour-long episodes that would serve as a promotion for each of the four realms Walt envisioned for his park. There was Frontierland, with its "tall tales and true from the legendary past," which would offer an idealized version of the nation's history, complete with a riverboat and Conestoga wagons;

THE TRAIN OBSESSION WAS
MORE THAN A MIDLIFE CRISIS.
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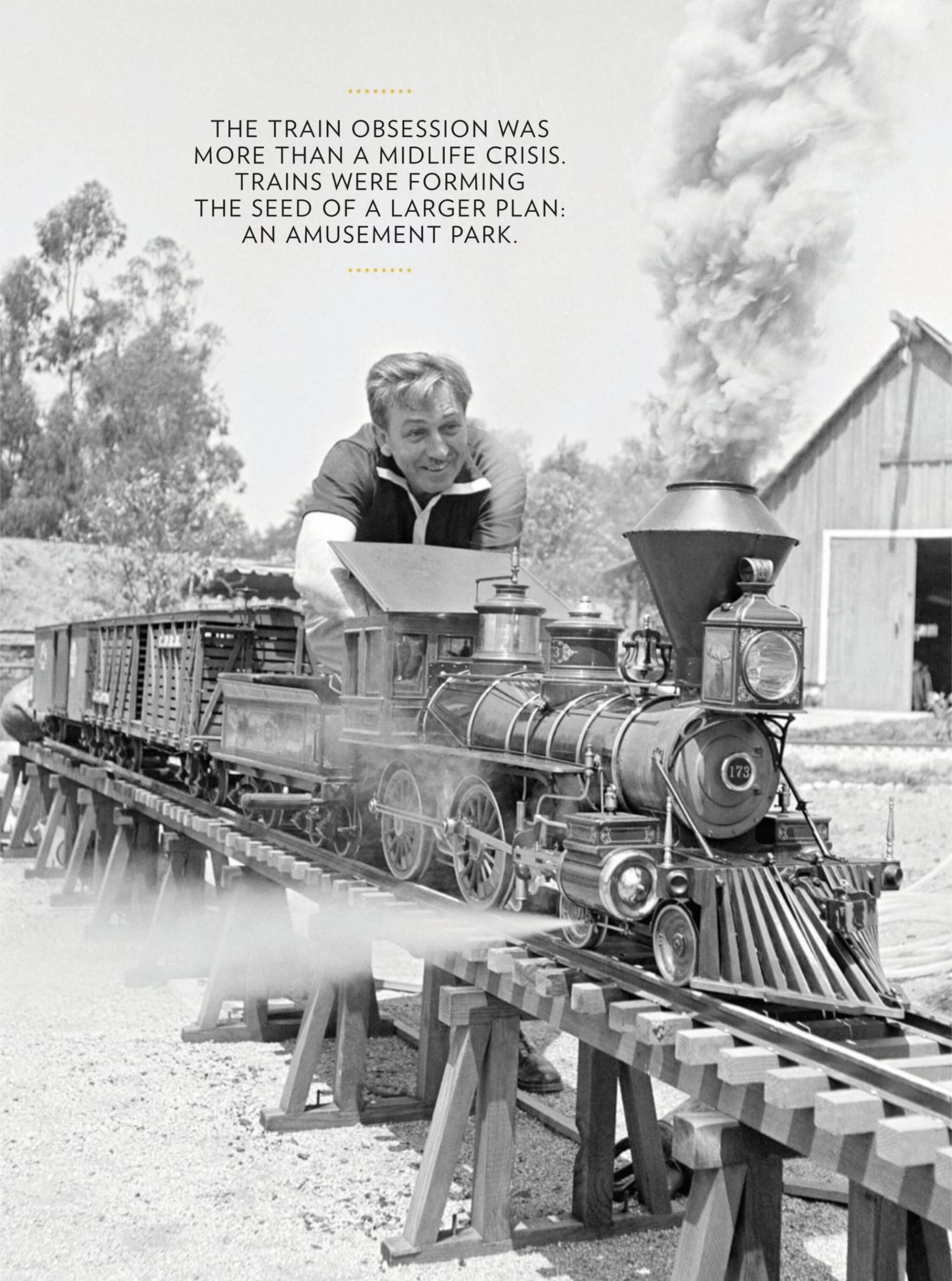
THE SEED OF A LARGER PLAN:
AN AMUSEMENT PARK.



Tomorrowland had the "promise of things to come" and would focus on progress; Adventureland was "the wonder world of nature's own realm"; and Fantasyland, "the happiest kingdom of them all." At the entrance he set Main Street, based on Walt's hometown of Marceline, with its station and a train that would travel around the park's perimeter. From there visitors set off to the different lands, with Sleeping Beauty Castle at the center.

The creation of the park was orchestrated by a group called the Imagineers, who gave the area a cinematic sensibility. They saw it as a living animation and set out to make an artificial world real. Visitors would enter what are essentially elaborate movie sets, where they could experience the different stories. Work started in July 1954. Construction proved meticulous in detail, with much built at three-quarter size to offer visitors a sense of intimacy. A raised berm encircled the edges of the park, ensuring that there would be no views of the outside world, and over it Walt laid out tracks for his beloved train. He obsessed over the look of his park, with Lillian commenting, "He knew where every pipe was. He knew the height of every building."

As work progressed on the park, ABC prepared *Walt Disney's Disneyland*. Walt served as the host, projecting a calm, reassuring presence, and Americans embraced him as Uncle Walt. The first of the shows aired in October 1954, with more than half of those with televisions tuning in. Then in December, to promote Frontierland, they aired the first of several *Davy Crockett* episodes, which followed the adventures of the American frontiersman and became an immediate success.

Because of Walt's focus on details,

**DISNEY SPENT HOURS tinkering with trains in his Holmby Hills backyard (opposite). The hobbyist named his locomotive the Lilly Belle after wife Lillian. Clearly, Walt relished his family and enjoyed spending time with them. He's captured above in the '50s, poodle in lap, surrounded by his loved ones, including Lillian and daughters Diane and Sharon.**

construction took longer than planned, and six weeks prior to the opening date, much was not completed. The park's entrance was still not landscaped, Sleeping Beauty Castle was unfinished, and the robotic animals were not ready for the jungle ride. But determined to be on time, Walt tripled the construction crew, with the cost rising to $17 million.

July 17, 1955, was very hot. Temperatures in Anaheim reached 100 degrees. Disneyland was designed for 15,000 people, and 28,000 showed up, along with 1,000 members of the press. Art Linkletter hosted the ABC show on the opening day, with actor Bob Cummings and future governor Ronald Reagan as reporters, and 29 cameras followed the activities around the park. When the show began, Walt rode up with Mickey and California governor Goodwin Knight in a train with some of its passengers—the children of Los Angeles's foreign consuls.

The opening did not go quite as well as planned. The water fountains didn't work. The heat softened the asphalt along Main Street, causing women's heels to get stuck. Mr. Toad's Wild Ride and the Autopia ride had to be shut down. And the food stands ran out of refreshments. The *Los Angeles Tidings*' headline announced that "Walt's Dream is a Nightmare." It didn't matter. Half of America tuned in to the special, and those entering the park found a magical place. As visitors made their way through the various lands, they enjoyed a ride on the railroad, a trip on the Jungle Cruise, and a twirl on the Mad Tea Party cups; boarded the Mark Twain Riverboat; and rode in the Canal

**WALT'S PLANS FOR DISNEYLAND really took shape by 1954, as he discussed his vision with a couple of Imagineers (left). Among the inspirations for Sleeping Beauty Castle (seen here under construction) was the magnificent Neuschwanstein Castle (above), built starting in 1869 in Southern Bavaria.**

Boats of the World. Diane Disney said she had never seen her father so happy.

*Times* critic Crowther, who during his earlier visit with Walt wondered why he was toying with trains, later noted: "This great amusement park may be a symbol of mass commercialism in our day. It may be an entertainment supermarket. It may be many things that high-brow citizens frown on. But it is tasteful, wholesome, and clean. It is a place of delight for millions, who escape into its massive fantasies."

Millions showed up each year. Americans saw it as an escape from everyday life—a safe, idealized small town of days past. It was an America that people hoped existed, one without complications, a place filled with friendly neighbors. And it wasn't just the common man and woman paying the $1 entrance fee. Politicians, heads of state, world leaders, and celebrities flocked to Anaheim. In 1959, then Senator John Kennedy, as well as Ahmed Sékou Touré, President of Guinea, toured the park; and Walt and Lillian gave King Mahendra and Queen Ratna of Nepal a ride on the railroad in 1960.

Disney's timing to create his park proved prescient. In 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed legislation funding the construction of the U.S. Interstate Highway System. And with the end of World War II, America experienced a population surge, bringing with it the sort of children who would love to go to Disneyland. "He was lucky in that in the 1950s," says Disney historian Garry Apgar, "people have more and more money. They were much richer than people were in the '30s. And

**THE HAPPIEST PLACE ON** Earth flung open its doors to eager youngsters on July 17, 1955. Despite the pomp and circumstance, the day was remembered by park staff as a disaster—concessions ran out and people's shoes got stuck in recently laid asphalt. Later that same year, kids got another treat from Uncle Walt: *The Mickey Mouse Club* TV show (opposite), starring Annette Funicello (at bottom right).

you could fly out by the late '50s and '60s. So he came along at the right time."

Tom Sawyer Island, the only attraction designed by Walt and inspired by Jackson's Island in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, opened in 1956. Other rides followed, like the Matterhorn in 1959, the first tubular-tracked roller coaster, which allowed for twists and turns not available on wooden tracks. Audio-animatronic technology—a robot that has movements and sound—arrived in 1963 in the Enchanted Tiki Room. The following year WED created four audio-animatronic displays at the New York World's Fair, which were then installed in Disneyland, including the It's a Small World ride, with singing children from all nations. In 1967, they opened the Pirates of the Caribbean ride.

Seeing the utility of television, three months after Disneyland opened, *The Mickey Mouse Club* premiered. The show sported a cast of charming and energetic child actors, cartoons, skits, and music. It aired each weekday offering a different theme such as Fun With Music Day and Talent Roundup Day.

"Within three years of opening the park, the money was flowing in," says Bill Cotter, author of *The Wonderful World of Disney on Television*. "They didn't have enough places to put it all." In 1960, Disney paid ABC $7.5 million to buy out their investment in Disneyland. The following year, Disney switched networks to NBC, which aired *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*. By then, Disney was one of the nation's most profitable entertainment enterprises. Seeking to bolster youngsters' dreams, Walt founded the California Institute of the Arts, a professional school for the creative and performing arts, in 1961 in Valencia, 30 miles from downtown Los Angeles.

The firm's film innovations also continued, much of it led by Ub Iwerks, with his new anamorphic lens being used for 1959's *Sleeping Beauty*, which allowed for the film to be shot in widescreen. Artists traditionally animated on sheets of paper, and inkers then traced the lines onto clear cels. If the inker wasn't careful, the lines might not be perfect. To find a better way to make the drawing, Ub worked with Xerox Corporation and developed a process that allowed animators to skip the inking process and transfer drawings directly onto the cels. It not only saved money but ensured the spontaneity of the line drawing. *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* used the technique, and when it came out in 1961, it became one of the top-grossing films

**WALT DISNEY (RIGHT) reviews storyboards for 1959's *Sleeping Beauty* with Les Clark (at record player) and two other studio animators.**

# THE ARTISTS

Drawing on their unique skills and talents, these men and women were among Disney's most prolific animators.

## LES CLARK

Les Clark met Walt and Roy Disney in 1925 while serving them ice cream in the confectionary shop across the street from their office. Soon after, Walt noticed how well Clark lettered the store's menus, and when he graduated from high school, Walt hired him. Clark learned his craft under the tutelage of Ub Iwerks, worked on 1928's *Steamboat Willie*, and afterward became the lead Mickey Mouse animator. As one of the group of legendary Disney artists known as the Nine Old Men, Clark gave us many of the studio's most important characters, such as the Seven Dwarfs, Pinocchio, Cinderella, and Tinker Bell.

## ERIC LARSON

In 1933, Eric Larson submitted sketches to the Walt Disney Studio and started as an assistant animator. He would work on such films as 1953's *Peter Pan*, 1955's *Lady and the Tramp*, and 1967's *The Jungle Book*, and like Clark, Larson is remembered as one of the Nine Old Men. As animation director of 1940's *Pinocchio*, he formed the lovable cat, Figaro, and through the studio's Talent Program, actively recruited artists such as Tim Burton. He was "the best animation teacher ever," recalled Andreas Deja, who created Scar in *The Lion King*. "No one was more concerned with passing on the Disney legacy than Eric."

## RETTA SCOTT

As a college student, Retta Scott spent hours sketching animals at Los Angeles's Griffith Park Zoo, a pastime that came in handy when she joined the company in 1938. As the studio's first female animator, Scott drew the hunting dogs in 1942's *Bambi*. Noted supervising animator Frank Thomas, "Retta had an astounding ability to draw powerful animals. She seemed to have a keen understanding of their moods and attitudes." Scott also worked on 1940's *Fantasia* and 1941's *Dumbo*. During the war, she helped make 1942's *Donald Gets Drafted;* she later worked on 1949's *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad*.

## JOHN LASSETER

John Lasseter started at Disney in 1979 and worked on 1981's *The Fox and the Hound*. He soon headed over to Lucasfilm, which became Pixar when Steve Jobs bought the company in 1986. There he directed 1988's *Tin Toy*, for which he won an Academy Award for Best Short Film. When Pixar began making films with Disney, Lasseter directed 1995's *Toy Story* as well as 1998's *A Bug's Life*. In 2006, he came back to Disney as chief creative officer after it bought Pixar and produced films like 2009's *Up*, 2015's *Inside Out*, and 2017's Oscar-winning *Coco* before heading to Skydance Media's animation division in 2019.

Meet Mowgli, the man cub.
Baloo thinks he'll make a darn good bear.
Shere Khan thinks he'll make a darn good meal.
WALT DISNEY'S
The Jungle Book

**THE NEXT GENERATION BEGAN taking a larger role in company operations. Roy E. Disney (above, left) and Ron Miller, husband of Diane Disney, examined film in 1967, the same year *The Jungle Book* was released.**

of the year. The *Los Angeles Times* commented that "it has a new subtlety in color design and new smoothness in movement, partly attributed to a new 'clean, fast, dry, direct, positive electrostatic copying process.'"

Later that year, Disney perfected what is now called green screen, allowing filmmakers to combine actors and background footage. They first tried it in *The Parent Trap* in 1961. Three years later they used the technique in *Mary Poppins*, and the film's seamless look made the characters' interaction with the animations believable. The Academy took notice and showered *Mary Poppins* with 13 nominations, including one Walt had long dreamed of: Best Picture. While it didn't win the top award, the film took away five Oscars. At the same time, the Academy bestowed on Ub a special Oscar for his ingenious technical creation.

As the nation changed in the early 1960s with the rise of the Beatles and Bob Dylan and America's increased involvement in the Vietnam War, some saw Disney as retrograde and conservative. But they still loved his films and flocked to his park for a safe escape. The success of Disneyland made Walt dream of creating a bigger park. Disneyland covered 160 acres, and Walt was not happy that crass commercial sites had opened around his creation. He decided to find a larger site for his secret Project Future. He found what he wanted in central Florida, and using dummy corporations so as not to reveal what he planned or be overcharged, the firm bought 27,443 acres, a site almost 200 times the size of that in Anaheim. This would

be Disney World, and would include EPCOT, the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow. Walt saw his utopian city as a center of research and development. Most of all, he dreamed of it as a functioning residential city that would change the way people lived.

The plan was announced at a news conference in November 1965, and the firm set out to spend $400 million to make it a reality. But in late 1966, Walt learned he needed spinal surgery for his old polo injury. During the preoperative exam, doctors found a cancerous mass on his lung, the result of decades of smoking. He was told that he had six months to two years to live, but he died on December 15 soon after Roy visited him at his hospital bedside. Newspapers announced his passing. The *Los Angeles Times* headline read "Wizard of Fantasy Walt Disney Dies." The *New York Times* reported, "Walt Disney, 65, dies on Coast; Founded an Empire on a Mouse." Ub and his son Don heard the news and Ub said, "That's the end of an era."

Roy took over as head of the company and changed the new park's name from Disney World to Walt Disney World. Construction began in May 1969. To drain the muck in the swamps, 55 miles of canals and levees were dug. Disney constructed its own utilities and created underground tunnels for employees to pass through. Roy also pushed through legislation to create the Reedy Creek Improvement District, with the Florida Legislature granting the company quasi-governmental control over the area. Then on July 7, 1971, Ub passed away at age 70. Roy opened the park on October 1, and the *Orlando Sentinel* announced, "D(isney) Day: Mickey Rolls Out Mat." LIFE magazine featured it on the cover. It was a success, and two months after Walt Disney World opened, it welcomed 50,000 visitors on Thanksgiving Day. The following month, Roy died in the same hospital as his brother. He was 78.

**THE DISNEY THEME PARK portfolio expanded in 1971 with the opening of Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. Park staff and characters posed for a grand-opening snapshot (opposite). Snow White's dwarfs (above) marched in an opening-week parade.**

100 YEARS

*Chapter 4*

# A NEW GENERATION

With the passing of the studio's founders, new leaders transformed the firm into one of the world's most powerful entertainment companies.

***The Lion King*** **debuted in 1997 and is now Broadway's third-longest-running show and its highest-grossing.**

**A 1978 MODEL (ABOVE) demonstrated what the reimagined EPCOT would look like when it opened in October 1982 at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. The now iconic geodesic sphere (opposite) at the heart of the theme park measures 165 feet in diameter and houses the Spaceship Earth ride.**

WALT DISNEY'S UTOpian community never happened. When EPCOT finally opened in 1982 on 260 acres in Walt Disney World, it had been transformed into a theme park with an educational slant. With Walt and Roy gone, other executives ran the firm. And while Disney's profits were declining, they continued to release successful films, like 1976's live-action *Freaky Friday* and the 1977 animation *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*. Turmoil, though, rocked the company. In 1977, Roy E. Disney, son of Walt's brother Roy, who joined the family business in 1954, resigned, later stating, "I just felt creatively the company was not going anywhere interesting. It was very stifling." One big animation project, *The Black Cauldron*, was taking forever and costing a lot of money. Then animation director Don Bluth, who first worked at Disney in 1955 on *Sleeping Beauty* and oversaw films like 1977's *The Rescuers*, became frustrated by the corporate nature of the firm. He jumped ship in 1979 during the production of *The Fox and the Hound*, established Don Bluth Productions, and was soon joined by 14 former Disney employees.

An October 1980 *Los Angeles Times* headline read "It Isn't Funny at Mickey's Studio," and the piece reported that "There is a creative crisis at Disney, a complicated one, having to do with a diminishing enthusiasm for Disney films, which in turn has to do with changing audiences and changing mores." The company, it seemed, was unaware of America's evolving tastes and what viewers wanted to see. Films like 1980's *The Last Flight of Noah's Ark* proved so uninspiring that *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Roger Ebert wrote how it was "a dreadful movie, bankrupt of creative imagination."

Ron Miller sought to revive the firm. Walt's son-in-law had worked his way up at Disney, spending 20 years producing such movies as 1965's *That Darn Cat!* In 1980 he became president, and later CEO, and acknowledged that "We've got trouble, and we're doing something about it." Miller realized he had to expand Disney's mandate and knew full well of his father-in-law's aggravation over how the company had become straightjacketed by its own image. He recalled going with his wife, Diane, to a 1962 screening at Walt's home for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the Academy Award–winning coming-of-age movie about small-town life and racism during the Depression. Afterward Walt said to him, "Damn, I wish I could make a film like that." As Miller noted, "I watched the frustration with Walt, the fact that he had cornered himself by being a G-rated company while all these other companies are making … films dealing with sex and things like that. We had tunnel vision and we could not break apart from that."

To evolve the business, Miller in 1984 formed Touchstone Films, a studio tasked with making movies for an older and more mature audience. As historian Bill Cotter tells LIFE, "Ron was the first one that had the guts to go into non-G programming." Touchstone had an early hit with 1984's *Splash*, starring Tom Hanks and Daryl Hannah. The *Hollywood Reporter* called the mermaid-out-of-water story "a rambunctious comedy," and it became the 11th-highest-grossing film that year.

A year after launching Touchstone, Miller started Touchstone Television, which developed such hit shows as *The Golden Girls*.

Positive change had come to Disney, and in February 1983, Miller told shareholders that EPCOT was packed, with 4.7 million visitors arriving since it had opened five months earlier. And as preparations were made to open the new $1.4 billion Tokyo Disneyland, he reported how it had already sold two million advance tickets, joking how "We may just have built the largest reserved-seat entertainment facility in the world." In April, the company launched the Disney Channel, offering cable subscribers the chance to see traditional Disney fare—its first show was *Good Morning, Mickey!*—as well as its animal shows and box office hits. And in May, Miller unveiled a new Fantasyland at Disneyland with a Bavarian-style, storybook feel.

But during Miller's tenure, there were also expensive hostile takeover attempts that hurt Disney's bottom line. Corporate raider Saul Steinberg tried and failed to dig his claws into the mouse and sell off parts of the company, costing Disney nearly $300 million to buy back Steinberg's share of the firm. In 1984, the board replaced Miller with Michael Eisner as new CEO and Frank Wells as president and chief operating officer. The new bosses knew that they needed new animated films, and Jeffrey Katzenberg, who had worked with Eisner at Paramount, was brought on as chairman. They also lured back Walt's nephew Roy, making him the head of animation. These changes were needed because the animation division was in a real slump. In 1985, it finally released *The Black Cauldron*. The film reportedly cost more than $40 million—the most at the time for an animation—but earned just $21 million and was beaten at the box office by *The Care Bears Movie*.

More turmoil ensued. Since 1940,

**MICHAEL EISNER BECAME CEO of Disney in 1984 and helped usher in its global expansion. In 1988, he hitched a ride with Roger Rabbit at Disney World (above). That same year, the park celebrated Mickey's 60th anniversary (above, right) with a parade, in which 4,000 children from around the world marched while carrying hometown signs.**

the animation division had worked out of the Disney Animation Studio. Walt had overseen the construction of the streamlined modern structure, making sure there was lots of natural light for his artists. There they created everything from *Dumbo* to *The Fox and the Hound*. As the executives remade the company, the animation division in 1986 was summarily moved off the Burbank lot to assorted warehouses and trailers in Glendale two miles away. For many of the artists, the move was a slap in the face to them and their art.

Eisner worried about the chore ahead, of revitalizing the company. In 1987, he told Diane Sawyer on *60 Minutes*: "Our name is a fantastic asset, and it represents a terrific man who was very creative. And I hate to be the person who shot himself in the foot and ended it. I don't want to be that legacy. I'd like to keep it going but I want to add to it. I would like to have new things." Eisner needn't have worried, for under his and Wells's control, the firm flourished, a period that has been referred to as the Disney Renaissance. Traditional and profitable Disney films started being produced. Katzenberg arranged a partnership with Steven Spielberg and his Amblin Entertainment and championed 1988's *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, a live action–

animation comedy–murder mystery directed by Robert Zemeckis, who had just completed *Back to the Future.*

*Roger Rabbit* takes place in Toontown, a community inhabited by not only such Disney stalwarts as Mickey, Donald, and a hippo from Fantasia, but Betty Boop, Bugs Bunny, and Woody Woodpecker from competing animation houses. Creating the realistic look of actors like Bob Hoskins and the other humans interacting with the cartoon character was made possible by a new motion-control technology that joined live-action scenes with animation, a look *Variety* praised as "an unparalleled technical achievement where animation is brilliantly integrated into live action." Ebert called it "sheer, enchanted entertainment from the first frame to the last—a joyous, giddy, goofy celebration of the kind of fun you can have with a movie camera."

The next year, Disney released *The Little Mermaid*, which won two Oscars, including one for the Alan Menken and Howard Ashman song "Under the Sea," and would rake in $85 million at the domestic box office. This was followed by the success of 1991's *Beauty and the Beast,* which became the first animated film to win a Golden Globe for Best Picture and the first one nominated for a Best Picture Oscar.

**THE DISNEY RENAISSANCE included numerous creative and technical achievements in animation, seen in such films as 1988's *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (above, left), starring Bob Hoskins; 1995's *Toy Story* (left), made in partnership with Pixar; and 1995's *Pocahontas* (above).**

Touchstone continued to turn out acclaimed films. In 1986, Martin Scorsese created *The Color of Money,* about pool hustlers, for which Paul Newman won an Oscar. And the following year, Robert Williams burst from the screen in *Good Morning, Vietnam,* a film *Time* critic Richard Schickel called "the best military comedy since *M*A*S*H* disbanded." Five years later, Williams would turn in one of his most maniacally brilliant performances in Disney's *Aladdin.* That film earned half a billion dollars worldwide and two Academy Awards, as well as Disney's first and only Grammy for Best Original Song, going to Menken and Tim Rice for their "A Whole New World." The film was also notable for featuring Jasmine, the first Disney princess of color. Then in 1994, *The Lion King* roared into theaters, won two Academy Awards, and at the time was the second-highest-grossing film. A year later, *Pocahontas* became the fourth highest grossing film of 1995.

Innovations continued. Disney used the new Computer Animation Production System to create 1990's *The Rescuers Down Under,* a sequel to 1977's *The Rescuers.* The film was made in collaboration with Pixar and allowed for animation cels to be digitally inked, creating multiplane effects without the need for that camera. It also cost less to do. "The idea to revolutionize, to make it cheaper, to make it better, that was the driving force of it," Disney's then president of feature animation Peter Schneider told the website Collider.

As a sign of the growing reemergence of animation to Disney, in 1994 the firm opened a new 240,000-square-foot Feature Animation Building in Burbank and moved the staff back from Glendale. Soon after that, Pixar made 1995's *Toy Story* for Disney. "A lot of Pixar is built on the principles that Walt and his artists and writers established 90 years ago," Disney historian J.B. Kaufman tells LIFE. "They invoke that standard of quality and that constant striving for something better and better in their own work."

Eisner continued to push Touchstone, which came out with such box office hits as 1986's *Ruthless People,* with Bette Midler and Danny DeVito, and 1990's *Pretty Woman.* The latter film, which launched Julia Roberts's career, was a clear sign of a departure for a firm that, after it released *Bon Voyage* in 1962, regretted a scene where a Parisian sex worker tries and fails to entice an Indiana plumbing contractor played by Fred MacMurray. Hoping

**DISNEY'S FORAY INTO foreign markets hasn't always been met with cheerful smiles. When Euro Disney (now known as Disneyland Paris) opened in 1992, critics chided the company's initial resistance to incorporating French culture. (The park has since found its footing.) During this time, Disney also made strides into the architectural sphere, hiring the renowned Michael Graves to design its new headquarters in Burbank, which feature soaring 19-foot-tall dwarf supports (pictured opposite with Roy E. Disney for scale).**

to clone the success of Touchstone, in 1989 Disney created Hollywood Pictures, releasing such films as 1990's *Arachnophobia*. The division didn't do as well, however, and it stopped producing in 1996. It had more success when it purchased the independent film company Miramax in 1993, coming out with movies like 1994's *Pulp Fiction* and 1997's *Good Will Hunting*. The following year, Touchstone released its most profitable film, *Armageddon*, which made $555 million worldwide.

Disney also found similar success with television programs. In 1989, it came out with *The New Mickey Mouse Club*. The show ran until 1996 and introduced future stars Justin Timberlake, Britney Spears, Ryan Gosling, Christina Aguilera, and Keri Russell. In 1998, it brought out *Bug Juice*, a reality show about campers at Maine's Camp Waziyatah. There was also *The Famous Jett Jackson* from 1998 to 2001. Disney had recaptured the quality entertainment Walt was famous for. And realizing that the company had a treasure trove of classic films, Eisner had the firm release many of its films on video.

As a new departure, in 1993 the company founded Disney Theatrical Productions, and the following year made its first foray onto Broadway with *Beauty and the Beast*. *Time* magazine's theater critic William A. Henry III found the show utterly unimpressive, calling it "maybe the most vapid, shallow and, yes, cartoonish" show, as well as "the costliest and most complex ever." It made no difference to the fans of Belle and the Beast. The play earned nine Tony nominations, won one award, and ran until 2007 with 5,462 performances. It has since been staged around the world and in many, many high school productions.

*Beauty and the Beast* was just the first phase of Disney's plans to produce shows on Broadway, on London's West End, and around the world. At the time, architect Robert A.M. Stern had been designing buildings for Disney and arranged for Eisner to visit the New Amsterdam Theatre in 1993. The theater, on New York's 42nd Street, went up in 1903, and impresario Florenz Ziegfeld once ruled this grand theatrical house. It became a movie theater in the 1930s and was boarded up in 1985. When Stern brought Eisner inside, they watched as water poured from the ceiling and saw mushrooms growing in the orchestra pit. "The theater was almost impassable. Plaster was all over the stairs, like an alpine slag heap," recalled Stern to *Time*. "We each carried giant flashlights and wore hard hats. Birds were flying through, dropping their stuff as we passed. It was a mess, but of course a very romantic mess."

Despite the grime, Eisner could see the New Amsterdam's romance and potential, an interior with a mind-bendingly ornate blend of Art Nouveau and other turn-of-the-century ornamentation. He loved it. Setting out to restore the theater, Disney received a decades-long lease, part of the city's efforts to makeover the Times Square area and rid it of cheap consumer goods shops and porn theaters, like the Lyric Theatre across the street. Disney hired architect Hugh Hardy, and Hardy returned the theater to its original state, yet allowed it to look as if it had

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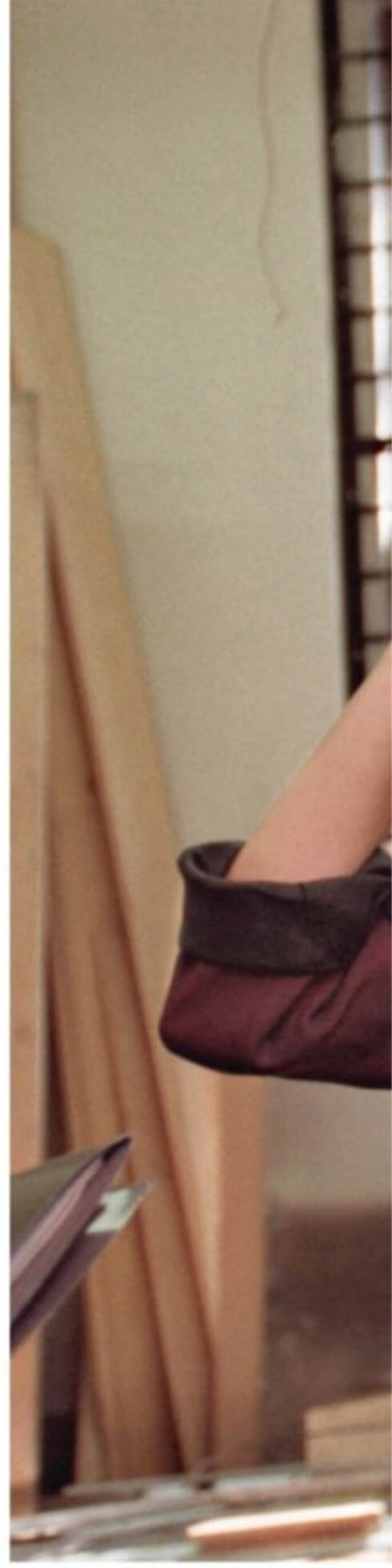


been gently lived in. The spiffed-up New Amsterdam opened in 1997, and its presence encouraged other corporations to move to Times Square—and new playhouses and movie theaters arrived, with the area becoming the mainstream entertainment center it had once been.

In May 1997, Disney staged a concert version of *King David* by Menken and Rice at the New Amsterdam. Then in November, Disney debuted a staged musical version of *The Lion King*, with an innovative interpretation by the avant-garde artist Julie Taymor, who outfitted the actors with life-size puppet costumes so they could portray the animals. *Time* magazine loved the show, writing how "Taymor's design wizardry accomplished the difficult task of satisfying everyone: adults as well as kids, tourists looking for a reason to come to New York City, and serious theatergoers looking for a reason to believe in Broadway again. It may not be the Second Coming, but there's nothing else like it on God's earth. Don't be surprised if it runs forever."

The play might just do that. It has so far racked up more than 10,000 performances and is the top-grossing Broadway show ever, earning more than $1.8 billion and counting. It also made deserved headlines for Taymor, who became the first woman to win a Tony for Best Director of a Musical. Soon Disney was staging shows in America and abroad, including *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in Berlin, *Mary Poppins* in London, and such musicals as *Tarzan, The Little Mermaid,* and *Frozen.* It is currently developing for Broadway a *Coco* musical based on the 2017 film.

While to many, Disney is the epitome of kitsch, under Eisner it unexpectedly transformed itself into a premier patron of high-design architecture. As the then CEO noted to *Time* in 1991, "[M]ovies go away, but buildings stand as monuments to your bad taste." Eisner commissioned Stern—who

**THE GREAT WALT WAY: MANY animated Disney features have found second lives as beautifully rendered Broadway musicals. The most successful, by far, has been *The Lion King*, perhaps owing to its A-list crew—Elton John and Tim Rice (opposite) collaborated on music for both the original film and the stage show, while Julie Taymor (above) helmed the production, becoming the first woman to win a Tony for Best Director of a Musical.**

designed the new animation building with its soaring Mickey sorcerer's hat rising above the entrance—to create, among others, two ersatz turn-of-the-century hotels in Lake Buena Vista, the Yacht and Beach Club Resorts, which look like the sort of shingle-style hotels one might find on Martha's Vineyard.

Many other famous architects, like Frank Gehry and Antoine Predock, were similarly tapped. Michael Graves's Team Disney Building in Burbank is topped by 19-foot-tall dwarfs holding up the pediment, something he felt appropriate "for a serious company engaged in entertainment." One of the firm's best buildings is Pritzker Prize–winner Arata Isozaki's Team Disney building. This fancifully colored structure in Florida is made up of two office wings hugging a 120-foot-tall yellow, green, and peach–colored conical tower. For Eisner, the decision to hire the best designers was simple. As he told *Time*, "It costs the same to do well as badly. It's exactly the same price if you build 1,200 ugly rooms."

And Eisner also set out to revive Walt Disney's original dream for EPCOT, the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, though on a much smaller scale. Instead of the futuristic community Walt envisioned, Eisner planned a place near Orlando

that harked back to 19th-/early 20th-century America, a walkable community with clapboard-sided homes, porches, white picket fences, trees, and a town square. Stern and urban designer Jaquelin Robertson created the master plan for this new urbanism community called Celebration, which opened in 1996, and well-known architects were selected to fashion the public structures. Graves did a silo-shaped post office, Philip Johnson the town hall with its riot of attenuated columns, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown the bank, and César Pelli a Googie-style spaceship-modern cinema.

And they weren't just building on land. Seeking to further diversify, Disney partnered with Premier Cruise Lines from 1985 to 1992 and offered travel packages that combined ship cruises passengered with costumed Disney characters in connection with a multiday vacation at the theme park. Then in 1998, their first cruise ship, *Disney Magic*, left dry dock for its maiden voyage. It was followed by *Disney Wonder, Disney Dream, Disney Fantasy*, and the newest, *Disney Wish*. These floating juggernauts offer fine dining, entertainment, and visits to relaxing ports of call. In 1997, Disney began leasing its own uninhabited Caribbean island, the 1,000-acre Gorda Cay, now called Castaway Cay. (A second island 130 miles away was acquired in 2019 and will start welcoming cruise liners in 2024.)

Castaway Cay, where scenes from *Splash* were filmed, is no longer abandoned. There are waterslides and hammocks on the land along with such roaming Disney characters as Mickey and Goofy, and, appropriately for a place to hide pirate booty, Captain Hook and Jack Sparrow. In the sea, snorkelers can explore 22 acres of fauna with hidden Minnie and Mickey figurines and the submerged ride vehicle from Walt Disney World's 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea attraction. Maybe some guests to Castaway Cay might even find some of Captain Hook's hidden treasure.

While he was overseeing the designing of towns, launching ships, and settling deserted islands, Eisner was largely focused on the firm's true cash cow, the parks and attractions. Working with filmmakers Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas, Disney opened Captain EO at Disneyland in 1986. The 17-minute-long, 3D movie-and-laser-light show stars Michael Jackson and contains two of his songs, "Another Part of Me" and "We Are Here to Change the World." In 1989, Disney created a 135-acre expansion of Disney World with the addition of Disney-MGM Studios (now called Disney's Hollywood Studios), with the Great Movie Ride, which offers an idealized version of Tinseltown.

But the most anticipated development was a new park: 1992 saw the opening of Euro Disney, 25 miles east of Paris. The launch, though, did not go as planned. Visitors didn't flock to its hotels, and many showed disdain for American midbrow culture. The park failed to offer wine, which, besides being a true culinary faux pas, confirmed to the French the unsophistication of their Americans hosts. Disney tried to please the locals by offering more French food choices but then learned that parkgoers wanted American cuisine like corn bread and barbecued chicken. London's *Independent* wrote how "Euro Disney, we are tempted to think, is America's cultural Vietnam,

**THE COLLABORATION WITH Pixar continued to prove fruitful with the release of 2001's *Monsters, Inc.* (below), which was both a critical and commercial success. Film stars (opposite) Billy Crystal and John Goodman are seen with executive producer John Lasseter, composer Randy Newman, director Pete Docter, and producer Darla K. Anderson.**

a punishment for the hubristic overreach of its commercial colonization of the globe." Attendance was low, and soon after opening, 3,000 staff members left. Labor unions also protested its employment requirements. It was a lesson for the firm, which sought to make it more appealing. They changed the name to Disneyland Resort Paris (now Disneyland Paris) and opened more rides.

The company, though, made money: Under COO Frank Wells's management, Disney's annual revenue grew from $1.5 billion in 1984 to $8.5 billion in 1994, and its market value leaped from $2 billion to $22 billion between 1989 and 1992. At the same time, revenues from theme parks and resorts tripled. Wells then tragically died in a helicopter accident during a backwoods skiing expedition in April 1994. Four months later, Jeffrey Katzenberg left and, along with Steven Spielberg and David Geffen, founded DreamWorks Animation.

Seeking to expand the company, Disney in 1996 acquired Capital Cities/ABC, Inc. for $19 billion. ABC, which aired the first Disney show in 1954, not only owned the broadcast network where Disney could show its programs, but also radio stations and ESPN. Expansions continued. In 1998, it threw open the gates for Disney World's 500-acre Animal Kingdom Theme Park, with its more than 2,000 animals. Disney Sea was added in Tokyo in 2001.

Then came time to open the new Hong Kong park on Lantau Island near the city. Learning valuable lessons from the launch of the park in France, Disney made sure to avoid all perception of cultural insensitivity. They consulted a feng shui pastor to look over the park's layout to ensure all was in harmony. When park officials learned that the front gate was positioned incorrectly, they shifted it by the suggested 12 degrees, something they were told would aid the park's prosperity. They likewise laid out a bend in the walkway so that chi, a positive energy, did not flow past the entrance and off to the China Sea. And since 8 is considered a lucky number, they designed one of the ballrooms to measure 888 square meters. As builders completed each building, Disney carried out a ritual incense burning. It even opened the park on a day considered lucky, September 12, 2005. As Jay Rasulo, then president of Disney's theme parks and resorts division told the *New York Times*, "I don't know anything about fire and kitchens and where fire belongs and what doesn't. But I certainly have learned that you need to respect people."

100 YEARS

*Chapter 5*

# ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

Disney has spread across the globe, adapting its creations and parks to thrill audiences everywhere.

A young visitor at Disney World's Magic Kingdom.

HONG KONG WAS Michael Eisner's last hurrah. His lieutenant, Bob Iger, who had served as president of ABC and joined Disney in 1996 when the corporation acquired the network, succeeded him in 2005 and further fueled the company's growth. Disney long wanted to own Pixar, which they had admired since they first saw John Lasseter's *Tin Toy* in 1988. In January 2006, Disney paid $7.4 billion for that studio. Marvel Entertainment followed in 2009, costing Disney $4 billion. Lucasfilm came next, in 2012, for an additional $4 billion. Seven years later, it paid $71 billion and took over 21st Century Fox, spurring the *New York Times* to comment how Disney had become "an entertainment colossus the size of which the world has never seen."

All the purchases resulted in many films. From Pixar they released *Ratatouille*, *WALL-E*, and 2023's *Elemental*. There have been dozens of Marvel movies, such as the Avengers franchise with *Iron Man* and *Captain Marvel*. When Disney bought Lucasfilm, it completed the Star Wars ennealogy, creating *The Force Awakens*, *The Last Jedi* and *The Rise of Skywalker*, films that have made $4.5 billion worldwide. And with 21st Century Fox it made *Avatar: The Way of the Water* and *Terminator: Dark Fate*. In 2022, the studio had 16 theatrical releases, grossing $4.9 billion and making it the seventh

**DISNEY EXPANDED IN ASIA in 2005, opening Hong Kong Disneyland in China (above, right), which joined the already thriving Tokyo Disneyland in Japan (above, left), which had opened in 1983. Shanghai Disneyland followed in 2016.**

year in a row that the company was number one at the global box office.

Disney's television efforts similarly grew as it increased the amount of original programming. *Lizzie McGuire*, starring Hilary Duff, first aired in 2001 and quickly turned Duff into a teen queen. *The Lizzie McGuire Movie* opened in May 2003 and pulled in a weekend gross of $17 million, second to *X2: X-Men United*. Three months later, Duff released her album *Metamorphosis*, which reached number one on the Billboard 200. In 2002, the Disney Channel aired its first animated hit, *Kim Possible*. Kim's best friend is Monique, played by Raven-Symoné, who appeared in *The Cheetah Girls* in 2003, the channel's first musical made for cable. She then starred in *That's So Raven*, in which she played a teenager with psychic abilities. The show became the Disney Channel's highest-rated original program and earned two Emmy nominations. In 2006, the TV

movie *High School Musical* debuted, which introduced the world to such future stars as Zac Efron and Vanessa Hudgens. And then came *Hannah Montana,* with Miley Cyrus, who has since become a Grammy-nominated recording artist.

All the films and acquisitions offered Disney many tie-ins for the park. At Animal Kingdom in 2017, it opened the 3D flying-simulator ride Avatar Flight of Passage, located within Pandora—The World of Avatar, based on James Cameron's 2009 movie. The following year Disney's Hollywood Studios unveiled Toy Story Land. And in 2019 arrived Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge at Disneyland and Disney's Hollywood Studios. There visitors could also experience an immersive Star Warsian stay, a mix between a hotel, role-playing game, and theme park ride that opened in March 2022. It was expensive, though. Two nights started at $4,800 for a couple, and $6,000 for a family of four. It attracted too few people, and in May 2023 Disney announced it was shutting it down. That hasn't stopped the company from launching Disney Parks Around the World—A Private Jet Adventure. Starting in 2024, those shelling out $126,500 each can head out on a 24-day, six-country private-jet extravaganza with visits to all 12 parks, as well as such non-Disney sites as the Taj Mahal and Great Pyramid of Giza. The company promises that this splurge will provide "access to extraordinary opportunities not available to the public."

With its 12 parks, Disney draws more visitors each day than the population of some nations. Florida's Disney World welcomes 58 million a year—and it's much pricier than it used to be: When it opened in 1971, it cost $3.50 to enter ($26 in 2023 dollars). A one-day ticket now starts at $109. Disney's vacation

destinations, along with purchases of food and concession, earned the corporation nearly $29 billion in 2022.

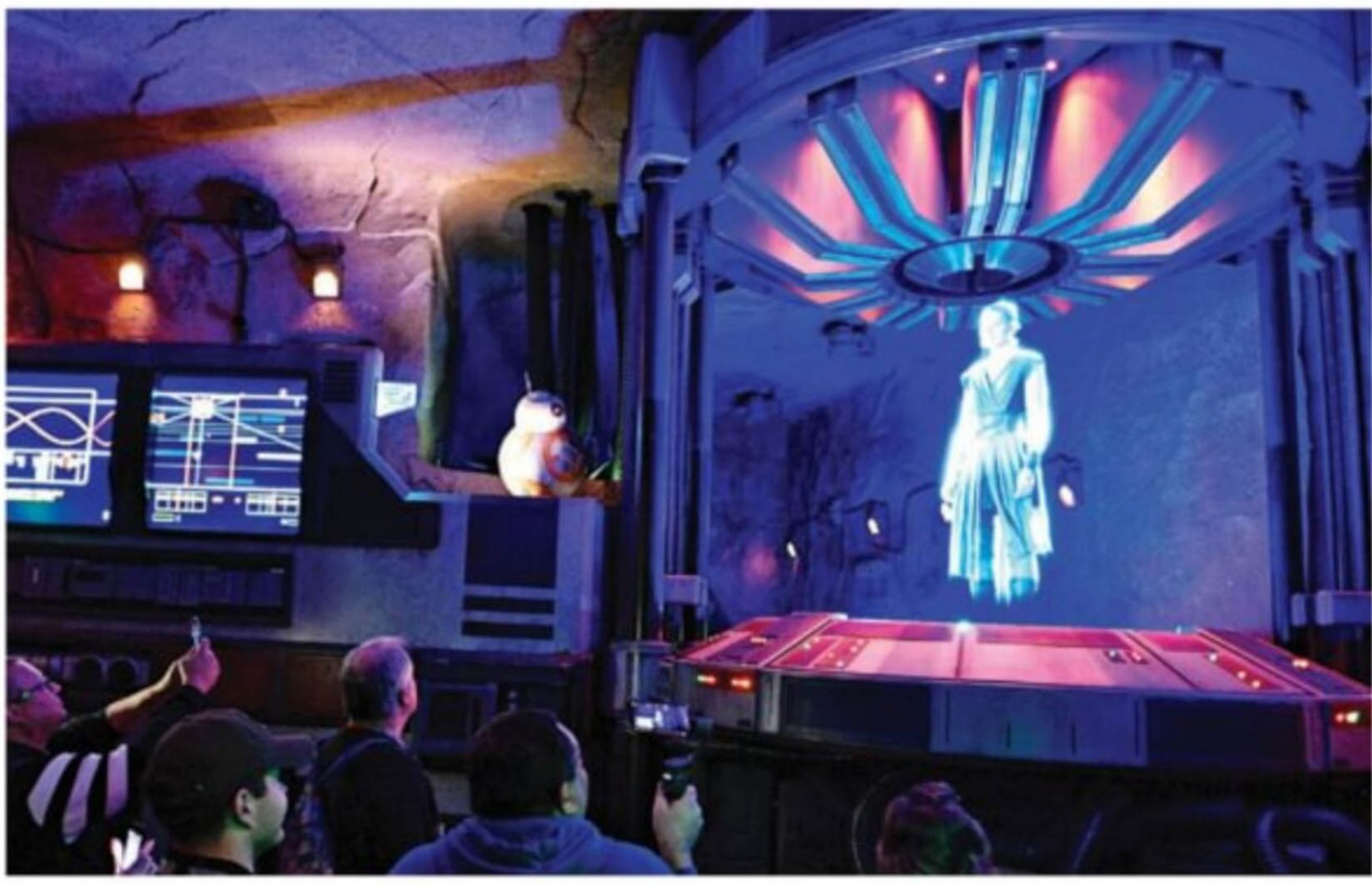
Ever attuned to evolving tastes, the parks have ramped up their eats, offering visitors one more reason to come by. There is the Wine Bar George at Disney Springs in Lake Buena Vista, Florida, with its artisanal charcuterie boards. Those scoring a reservation at Cinderella's Royal Table in Cinderella's Castle at the Magic Kingdom can enjoy entrees ranging from avocado toast to beef tenderloin. And if money is no object, Victoria & Albert's in Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa will serve a seven-course feast, with such dishes as Danish Hiramasa with carrot and Okinawan potatoes and butter-poached turbot flown in from France. All that and a selection of more than 500 wines, for $500 or so a head. Needless to say, Victoria & Albert's has a semiformal/formal dress code, so please, no Donald flip-flops.

But it hasn't always been squeals of laughter and Mickey-shaped pretzels at Disney. The feel-good company has a long history of racial insensitivity, as with 1946's *Song of the South,* when Disney ignored requests by African American leaders to modify the script. Despite the controversy, the film was successful and rereleased a number of times, as late as 1986.

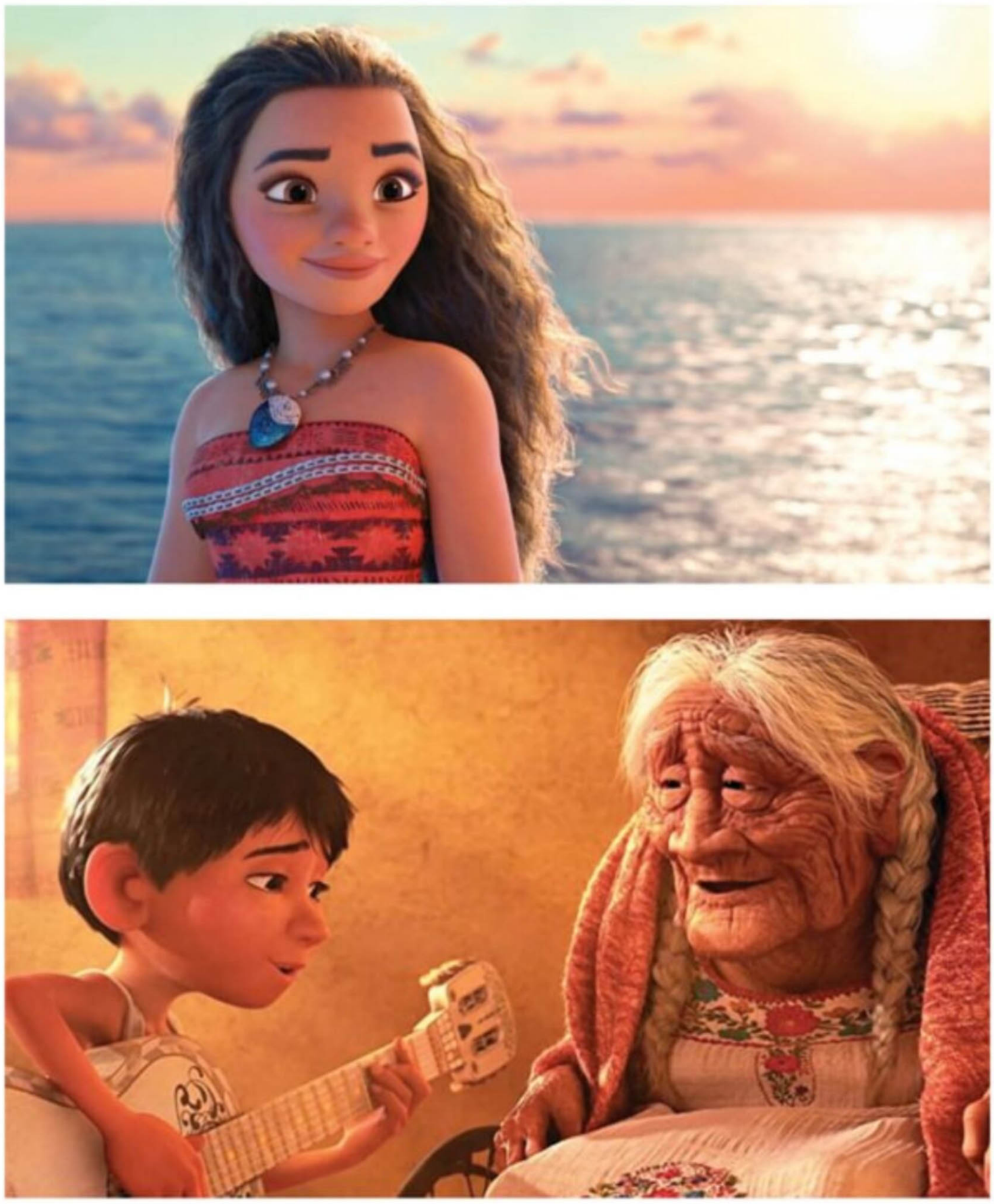
While not overt, there was this clear trend from the start at the firm. It didn't help that in 1989 Disneyland unveiled its Splash Mountain water-log ride, featuring animatronic scenes from *Song of the South.* The ride's creation is an odd decision given the flack the film received. It wasn't until protests over the 2020 killing of George Floyd—an African American man whose death at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer sparked nationwide protests—that Disney decided to "reimagine" the ride as Tiana's Bayou Adventure in the theme of *The Princess and the Frog.*

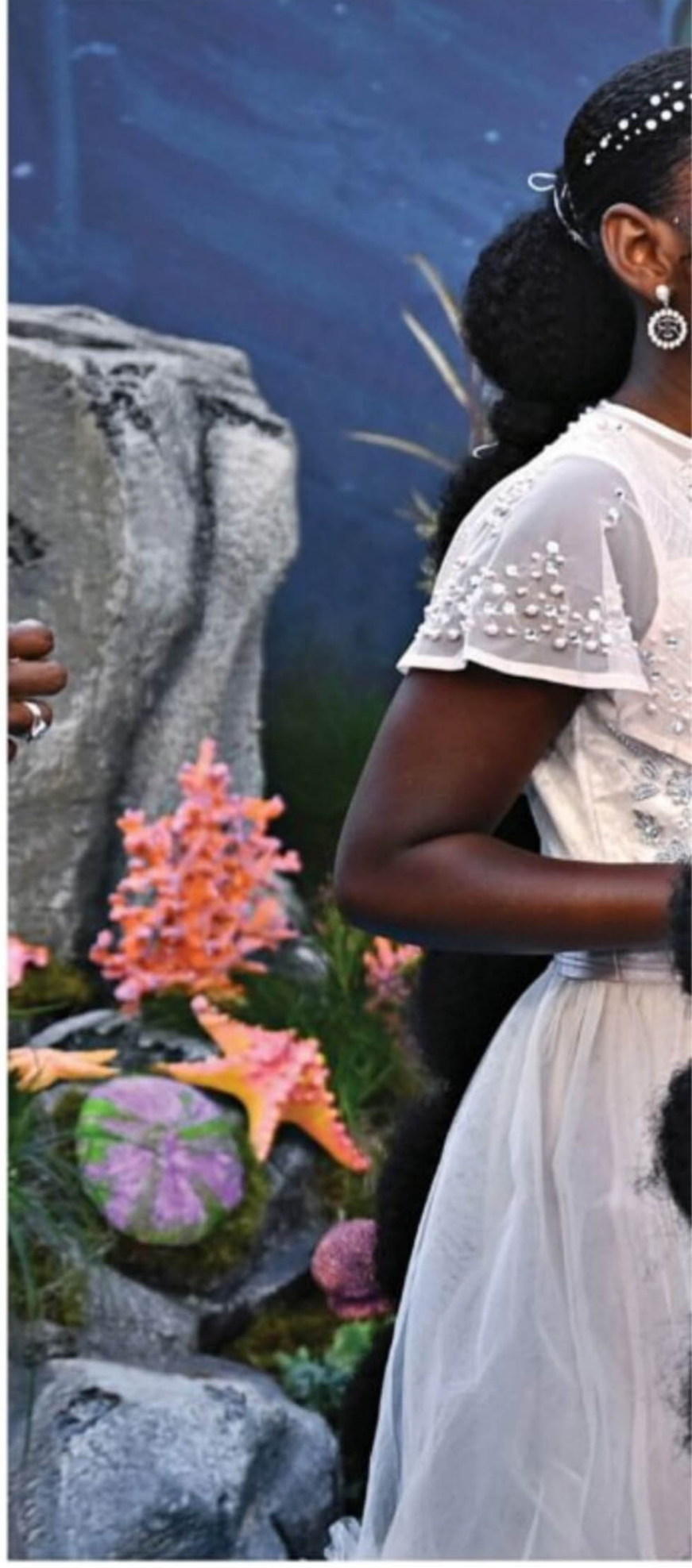
It has taken Disney decades to modify its approach. *Snow White* appeared in 1937, and since then the company has created many films with princesses, from Cinderella and Aurora to Ariel and Belle. They were all White. Finally, in 1992, *Aladdin* debuted with a royal of color, Jasmine. Three years later, Pocahontas, a Native American Powhatan princess, appeared. Then came Chinese princess Mulan in 1998, and in 2009 Tiana, the African American princess from New Orleans starring in *The Princess and the Frog.*

In 2023, Disney released the live-action *The Little Mermaid*, with an African American Ariel, played by Halle Bailey. And while countless Disney fans around the world now appreciate that there are princesses of color everywhere, even before the



**WHETHER IT'S UNDERSEA adventures on ice (Finding Nemo, opposite), virtual attractions from a galaxy far, far away (Rey in Rise of the Resistance, below), or revamped rides (It's a Small World with guests Chrissy Teigen, John Legend, and kids Milo and Luna, bottom), Disney continued to find ways to innovate and keep fans delighted.**





premiere of the new *Little Mermaid*, it became the focus of racist internet trolls, with people complaining that Ariel couldn't be Black. It is ironic that those adamant Disney fans making the comments are attacking the choice of an actor in a film about prejudice, about breaking down barriers. "This whole controversy feels archaic, from a different century," director Bob Marshall told the *New Yorker Radio Hour*.

Because of Disney's global reach, in 1988 it opened Disney Character Voices International, Inc. The division dubs and translates the firm's films. In 2014, Disney released a multi-language version of the hit song "Let It Go" from its 2013 musical film *Frozen*. The recording features actresses singing the song in 25 languages. The Japanese version by Takako Matsu climbed to number two on the Billboard Japan Hot 100 chart.

While making strides forward, Iger also made sure that Disney could reclaim its earliest roots. The company struck a deal in 2006 with NBCUniversal and traded sportscaster Al Michaels to NBC for Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, Walt Disney's first hit animation character from 1927. After 79 years, Disney and Ub Iwerks's first great creation finally returned to his original family. And despite his age, in 2013 Oswald made his first, albeit brief, appearance opposite Mickey in *Get a Horse!* He looked as young as ever, though now in a film with sound, one containing the archived voices of Walt Disney as Mickey and Marcellite Garner and Russi Taylor, who voiced Minnie over the years. Oswald has since appeared in video games, and fans can of course pick up Oswald ears and other items. He is one lucky rabbit.

Such merchandising has been big for the firm since 1932, when Herman Kamen started marketing Mickey Mouse for Walt and Roy. The corporation is now the world's top licensor, tallying up $56.2 billion in retail sales in 2021 for its Disney, Pixar, Marvel, Star Wars, and ESPN divisions. Shoppers can buy personalized Minnie Mouse beach towels, Luke Skywalker action figures, and WALL-E baby clothes. And you can snap up an Elsa and Anna *Frozen* wristwatch for around $30 or less. It is a lot cheaper than a vintage Mickey Mouse watch from 1933, the year they were introduced: Back then they cost $2 or $3 . Now, one of the rarest original timepieces will run you into the thousands.

Disney is clearly a firm with a long,

**IT TOOK A WHILE, BUT DISNEY films have finally begun to reflect their audience's diverse cultures and backgrounds. Clockwise from top left: 2016's *Moana*, which followed a Polynesian princess; Halle Bailey, star of 2023's live-action *The Little Mermaid*, met fans at the movie's U.K. premiere; 2017's *Coco*, which took inspiration from the Mexican holiday Day of the Dead.**

colorful and culturally important history. To honor her husband, Walt's wife, Lillian—who passed away in 1997 at age 98—donated $50 million in 1987 for the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. When it opened in 2003, *Chicago Tribune* architecture critic Blair Kamin raved about the shimmering crescent-shaped structure by architect Frank Gehry: "The building's buoyant, festive arcs simultaneously evoke the musical performances inside and celebrate urban life, as if the parade at Disneyland never stopped." Like the New Amsterdam Theatre in New York, which the firm restored in 1997, the building has contributed to its surroundings, helping to revitalize downtown Los Angeles. In 2001, Marceline, Missouri, welcomed people to the Walt Disney Hometown Museum, set in the town's former Santa Fe train depot. The train enthusiast in Walt would have been thrilled. And in 2009, Walt's daughter, Diane, and her son, Walter Elias Disney Miller, unveiled the Walt Disney Family Museum in San Francisco to help people recall how it all started.

It always stuck in Walt Disney's craw that his studio's artistic creations were not accorded the cultural respect of other art forms (though he was happy that cels from his 1936 *Three Little Wolves* were part of a show at New York's Museum of Modern Art that year). That, of course, has all changed. In 1938, art dealer Guthrie Sayle Courvoisier began marketing Disney cels, selling illustrations to the San Francisco Museum and other cultural institutions. Then in 1940, the Los Angeles County Museum

hung the Retrospective Exhibition of Walt Disney Medium with material from *Steamboat Willie* up through *Fantasia*. More recently, in 2021, London's Victoria and Albert Museum held a show on Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and included concept art from Disney's 1951 animated film as well as Tim Burton's 2010 Disney version. In 2022, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art offered Inspiring Walt Disney: The Animation of French Decorative Arts. In honor of the firm's 100th anniversary in 2023, Philadelphia's Franklin Museum debuted Disney100: The Exhibition. And over the years, Disney's work has been a muse to the likes of Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, Claes Oldenburg, and Roy Lichtenstein.

The small animation house Walt and Roy Disney started back in 1923 employed just a handful of workers. When a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times* visited their studio in 1930, he wrote that "Twenty-five artists are employed in the studio on Hyperion Avenue and musicians, gag men, and others gather in the studio while a picture is being worked out and a total of fifty-five people are on the studio pay roll. It undoubtedly is the smallest studio to turn out a product of world-wide interest and Walt Disney, the 28-year-old creator of Mickey Mouse, undoubtedly is the youngest man in that business of young men to build up such an astonishing success."

The Walt Disney Company now has some 213,000 employees. It is one of the world's largest entertainment corporations, runs parks, stages theatrical productions, produces TV shows, and to date has created more than 800 feature films, with more than 120 of them animated—not to mention the many, many shorts with Mickey, Minnie, Donald, Pluto, and other beloved characters. The spirit of Walt Disney is clearly very much alive, and the magical firm he founded 100 years ago continues to entertain, enchant, and thrill fans both young and old.

**HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY** parties celebrating Disney's legacy popped up all around the globe in 2023, including this vivid light installation in London. The exhibit, Wonder of Friendship: The Experience, highlighted some of the brand's most iconic friendships.

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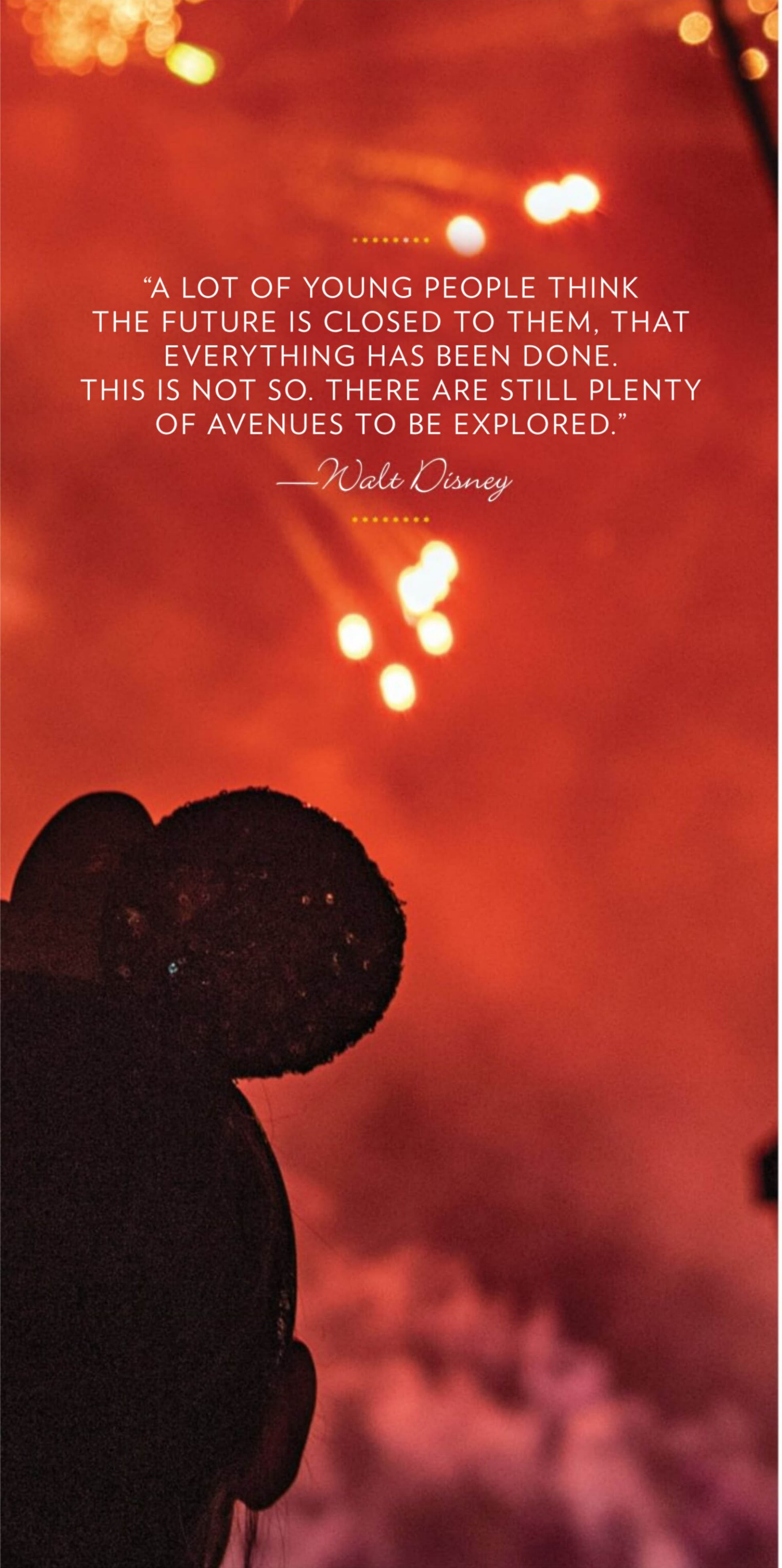
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THE FUTURE IS CLOSED TO THEM, THAT
EVERYTHING HAS BEEN DONE.
THIS IS NOT SO. THERE ARE STILL PLENTY
OF AVENUES TO BE EXPLORED.”
—Walt Disney

LIFE

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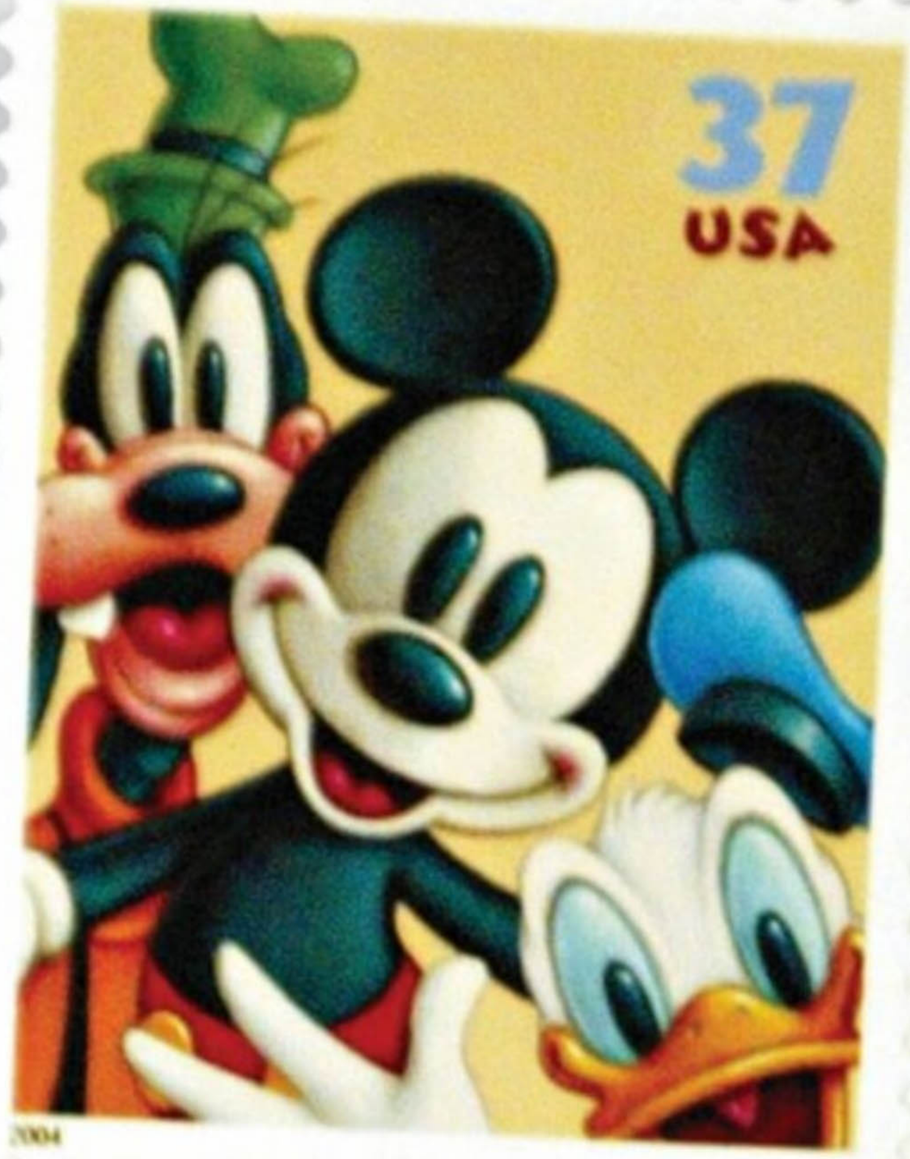
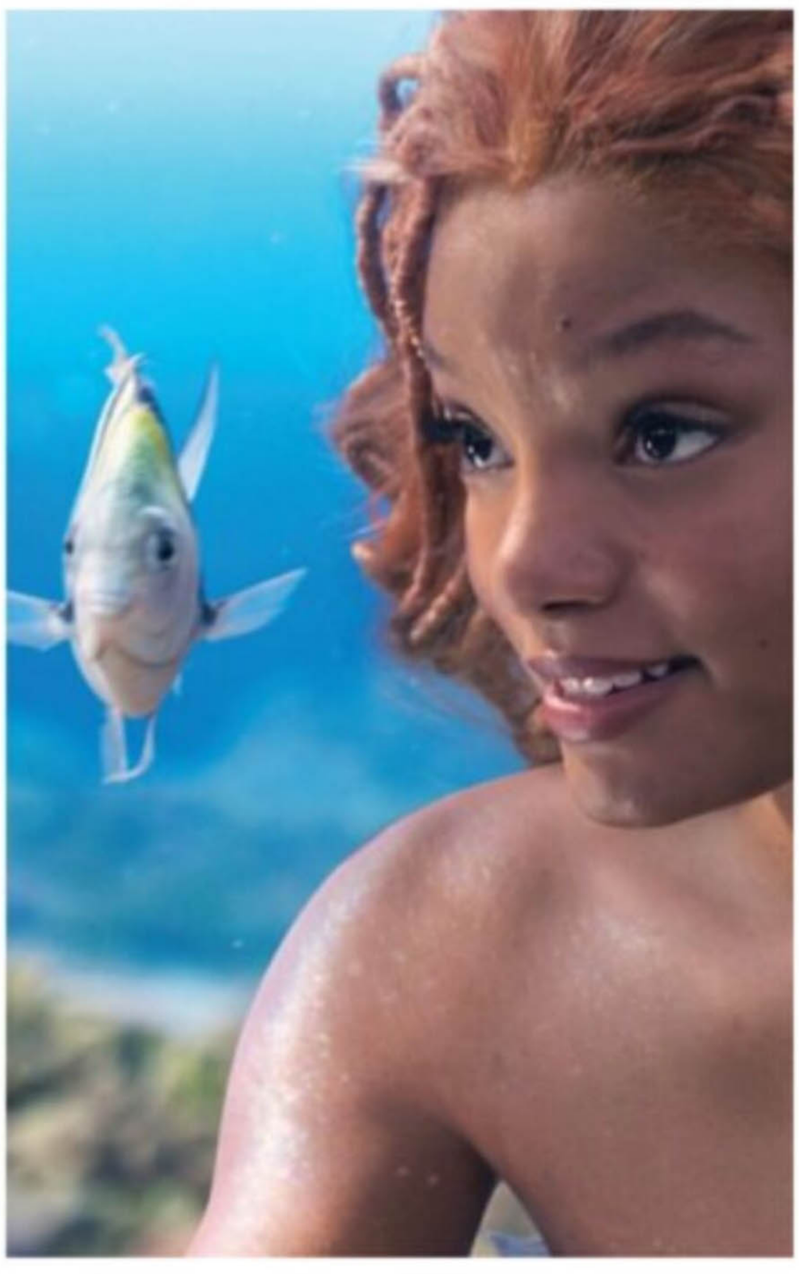


## THE STAMP ACTS

Following Walt Disney's death in 1966, fans launched a campaign to honor him with a stamp, even though regulations stated that non-presidents could not grace one until 10 years after passing away. The fans' effort succeeded, and in 1968, the U.S. Postal Service issued one with illustrations by Disney artists Bob Moore and Paul Wenzel. Since then, Disney characters—as with those above, from 2004—have graced many a letter, allowing fans to share the magic of Walt's kingdom.

# 100 YEARS OF DISNEY

Delight and ingenuity can take many forms. And in the century since its inception, the world of Disney, through characters and stories, images and song, has delighted so many millions in so many ingenious ways. The creative force of Walt Disney, the journey of Mickey Mouse, the blossoming of a Magic Kingdom—all of that, and much more, inside.